MERLE AND MAY

GRACE SQUIRES

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"ISN'T IT BEAUTIFUL?"

MERLE AND MAY

A STORY OF GIRLHOOD DAYS

BY

GRACE SQUIRES

NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

31 WEST TWENTY-THIRD STREET

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PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER, 1906

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

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MERLE AND MAY

CHAPTER I

THE NEW TENANT

There was a stampede on the back stairs, an almost simultaneous opening of the door into the sitting-room, and, having stumbled over the machine cover, May precipitated herself into the maternal presence.

"Have they come, mother?"

"Yes."

"I 'm going to call!"

"Not yet,—May! *MAY!*" but the door into the hall had slammed, and May was swiftly ascending the front stairs. Half-way she paused with an abrupt "Hullo!"

"Hullo!" came the surprised response.

"I was looking for you; I 've come to call," continued the unabashed, pausing before a niche in the

wall, designed for a statue, in which the new-comer sat.

"It's very kind of you; come up," said the statue *pro tem.* rising to her feet.

"I felt dreadfully," May proceeded, "when mother first said we 'd have to turn the chambers into a flat and let them. My father 's dead, and we 're not so well off now; but when I knew it was just two girls and their father I felt better. I 'll show you how the rooms used to be. This was Ganny's, our grandmother, you know. There was a little marble bowl and running water, but mother had a sink put in. It will be your kitchen, I suppose."

"A kitchen and dining-room together."

"This was papa's den—it 's your parlor now; and this little hall-room was mine. This dear room," continued May, "papa fitted up for Grace,—the blue carpet, the blue paper, the blue chamber-set—she picked them all out herself. Your father bought them, I believe. Is it to be your room now?"

"No, it 's Della's."

"Sister?"

"Yes."

"How old?"

"Nineteen."

"Engaged?"

"Mercy, no!—college."

"Sophomore?"

"No—enters this fall."

"And you 'll be all alone? Won't you miss her dreadfully?"

"It won't be till fall, you know; and that 's three months off," replied the girl evasively.

"This is your room, then, I suppose?" continued May, leading the way across the hall, and wisely refraining from making comment on her companion's last remark, which, nevertheless, had offered her a rich field for investigation. "This room is just built on. You see, my sister is engaged; and since father died, mother says she can't let Grace go. There 's no inspiration in keeping house without a man, too; so she built on a room, and ran it up to this story. Is it yours?" queried May, hastily stepping back from a tall mirror which reflected all too accurately a light frousled head with two bow-legged pigtails ending in a nondescript bow, a freckled nose, and a giraffe neck, the outline of which was not softened by an ill-fitting collar and a frisky necktie.

Startled by her own reflection, May now turned toward the new tenant, and with undisguised curiosity allowed her eyes to travel over the bronze waves of hair caught at the neck by a bewitching pink bow, the drooping gray eyes, the aristocratic nose and

pretty mouth, the tidy collar and cuffs, the well-manicured hands, down the shapely figure, clear to the toe-tips.

"Result satisfactory?" laughed the girl, with an amused light in the gray eyes.

"Highly!" replied May with ardor. "And isn't it time to know what we are to call each other? I'm 'May.'"

"I'm 'Merle.'"

"What an odd name! It's pretty, though. How old are you?"

"Nearly eighteen."

"I'm sixteen," straightening her tall figure. "Second year in High—where are you?"

"Third year—graduate."

"How jolly! French or Latin?"

"Both."

"*Lequel des maîtres amiez vous le mieux, le francais ou.*—how would you say 'Latin' in French?" clipped May with an inquiring wag of the frousled head.

"I should n't say it at all, *parceque j'aime les deux fort bien.*"

"How glibly you slid over that; I always thought it took a small mouth for French. That's one reason I did n't take German. Mother said 'prunes and prisms' would be better for my mouth than those

dreadful jaw-breakers. You did '*bien*,' I thought, especially well;—what do you think of when you say it? I always try to feel sort of sea-sick at the end But, dear me, how shall you manage about the work, with school?" added the incorrigible questioner.

"I don't know. We 've always boarded since my mother died, but Della going to college left me alone, and father had some silly notions about having a home. I don't know a thing about housework, except that I hate it, so I don't see where the 'home' will come in."

"Mother 'll help you, I know she will; she 's the dearest mother," replied May with a softening of the merry face, "and I 'll help with the dishes too, after your sister goes and you 're alone; and if your father could afford ——"

"May!" called an admonitory voice from below.

"Yes, mother. (I promised to make no family disclosures, nor to coax your skeleton from the closet)" confided May in a whisper, "so perhaps I 'd better go before I 've blundered. Come down whenever you want me; Grace is no earthly use since Will came on the scene, and mother feels papa's death so, I try to be in the house with her as much as I can. We are going to have flap-jacks for supper, and mother promised that I could get some syrup. I 'm going now."

May suited her actions to her words, for a long limb suddenly flashed across Merle's vision, and its owner flew swiftly down the banister rail. In a twinkling another lithe figure flew down the railing too, miraculously escaped the gas jet, and landed with a thud at her companion's feet. May sprang up with the agility of a cat, and said, laughing, as she held out her hands for the other to rise, "Highly satisfactory all round. I was afraid you were going to be a bit dignified, but now I know you 'll be no end jolly."

The rattle of a key in the latch hastened Merle in the settling of her collar and cuffs and the assumption of a proper air, so that, as her sister stepped in, her unconventional mode of descent was in no wise apparent.

"My sister Del—Miss Elliot," hastily corrected Merle in response to a warning eyebrow lift.

May was partner to a gentlemanly sort of hand-shake, and the interchange of a swift glance, after which she leaned against the newel-post, making no further effort to break the ice, but employed the awkward pause in digesting the impression that one glance had given her;—"Sharp eyes, and a firm mouth; knows a heap, I dare say,—but certainly not pretty." Later, in attempting a second glance which she intended to be surreptitious, her bright

eyes encountered the searching gray ones, and even she felt a moment's embarrassment and abruptly turned away.

"Come with me while I get the syrup, and I'll show you where the stores are," she said, addressing Merle, her hand on the sitting-room door.

"Don't stay long; there's a great deal to be done, Merle," called Della over the banister. "Have you unpacked and done as I said?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I knew I'd have it all to do over again; and since I've studied physics I don't believe in wasted energy."

"I thought as much. When do you intend to come back and help?"

"A week from Christmas!" The sitting-room door closed, shutting in the two girls.

"Mother, have you met—" began May, but a second encounter with the sewing-machine cover brought the sentence to an untimely end.

"No, dear," was the reply. "I met Miss Elliot when she came to look at the rooms with her father, but I have not met——"

"Merle!" ejaculated May, struggling to recover breath and equilibrium.

"I am glad to welcome you, my dear; you favor

your father, I think. Grace, dear. My eldest daughter, Miss Norton, Miss Merle."

May made a grimace at this formal introduction, and flung herself down the steep winding stair to the basement with an abandon that would have proved perilous save to one skilful from long experience.

Deserted by her lively companion, Merle felt a sudden stiffening of reserve. The easy greeting of "Miss Norton" had been grace itself, and she felt that her own stiff hand-shake must have seemed nervously self-conscious to this evidently polished and "engaged" young girl. Yet Merle's discomfort came from her own imaginings, for nothing could have been less disconcerting than the genial greeting of Grace Norton. She was tall and fair; and the impish light that danced in May's merry eyes was softened in hers to sweet and girlish charm. It may have been her first peep into the poetry of a woman's life that brought this sweetness to her face; or, perhaps, a patience born of suffering, for a heavy cross in Mrs. Norton's life was the delicacy of this dear daughter, who early showed signs of incipient consumption.

Merle, however, breathed a breath of relief when Grace betook herself back to the parlor and began practising, and left her with nothing more formidable

to meet than the pleasant eyes of Mrs. Norton, whose sweet face and gentle manner made May's " the dearest mother " seem fully justified. But Merle's shy reserve was not easily overcome; and, silently slipping into a chair to await May, who had descended for the syrup jug, she studiously avoided staring about the room, which already seemed wonderfully congenial and homelike, until a side-glance startled her out of her reserve.

"Oh my! the dear little thing! I had no idea there was a baby in the house," she exclaimed, catching up a tiny shoe which lay beside a diminutive chair.

" I don't wonder you are surprised, dear, for Roy is only two, and May is sixteen; I lost two little girls between them. Roy is the only boy we had, and was very dear to his father."

As if in answer to his name, Roy set up a loud " Mamma " in the adjoining room, and Mrs. Norton hastened to answer his peremptory summons. Taking advantage of her absence, Merle looked more deliberately about the room. To one that saw but visually it offered small attraction, for the carpet was faded, the mop-boards nicked, the shades at variance, the table littered; yet to Merle there was an atmosphere of home peace and contentment that was communicated to her in many ways. The canary that warbled in ecstasy to a pink oxalis, the tiny

bread and butter finger-prints on the window glass, the big easy chairs that seemed to offer welcome in their capaciousness, the pile of dainty sewing that whispered a young girl's secret, down to the tiny shoe lying in the sunshine, sent a thrill through Merle's sensitive frame. She felt her throat tighten and her eyes fill. This, this, was what she had longed for all these years,—home with its conscious love;—and a boarding-house, with its cold, mercenary mistress, was what she had known.

Mrs. Elliot had died when her girls were small, and the duties of motherhood had fallen on Della's young shoulders. She was by temperament a scholar like her father, a child inclined to discount girlhood, and to look at life on its serious side. Circumstances doubtless helped to make her self-sufficient and independent, quite inclined to make the world and its people over to her way of thinking. Certainly in years the girls were near enough to have been companionable, but utter dissimilarity in temperament served to make a wider breach than several years would have done between more congenial characters. To Della the care of Merle had been irksome from the start; a duty in which she found small return. Merle's dependence had never appealed to her; her beauty had been a care, and her disposition a hydra-headed enigma.

"You 'd better come in here, dear, there 's no knowing when that madcap of a May will reappear. She's probably washing the dishes she left this noon," called Mrs. Norton from the adjoining room, rocking comfortably back and forth with a little yellow head pillowed on her arm. "May is *not* fond of dish-washing," she added apologetically, as if that fact were quite surprising; "but she means well, though she has to turn over a great many new leaves in the course of a year. I had a talk with her only this morning; for now that it is vacation, and Roy is fretful, and I 'm so busy with Grace's sewing, she really must take hold."

"Can I leave the kettles? The water is n't very warm and they 're horrid greasy!" called up an appealing voice from the lower regions.

"You will wash everything in the sink, and leave that kitchen in apple-pie order. Have you forgotten our talk so soon?" answered Mrs. Norton, with an heroic attempt at discipline which deluded no one, least of all the lively May.

"I wish to goodness we were sailors and threw our dishes overboard! Tell Grace to stop playing lady and come and help; it won't hurt her a bit—'housework 's healthy,'" mimicked the burdened one, quoting a well-worn maternal maxim with laughable accuracy.

"Will her sister be married soon?" ventured Merle, athirst to know something of this young girl's romance.

"She 'll be twenty this fall, and her father gave his consent that she should be married then; but, she is not well—she had a little cough,—and we agreed that it would be best to set no date, but just to get ready comfortably. She loses nothing by a long engagement; it 's a very happy time, though I 'm not one to believe that all happiness ends with marriage;—I spent too many happy years myself for that," concluded the dear woman with a misty glance at a fatherly face that smiled sweet hope from its framing.

"Papa," lisped the discerning baby, pointing with a moist and unsteady finger. Mrs. Norton wiped her eyes hastily, and pillowed the yellow head more closely against her widow's gown, as if in thanksgiving for the little life that had been given her, though a more precious one was gone.

"Mother!" again proceeded from the basement, "where on earth are the dish towels? I can't find but one, and Pickles has knocked that down and chewed it!"

"And your sister goes to college this fall?" continued Mrs. Norton, ignoring the call;—"that is

most as bad as a marriage, she 'll be away so long. She must be a very clever girl to have won a scholarship."

"She is clever," admitted Merle with uncomfortable surprise. Was n't it just like Della, she thought, to air their poverty at the first interview? Why was it necessary to speak of the scholarship, which was paramount to saying:—"Don't think for a moment that my father could afford to send me." Probably she had told that it had been necessary to borrow money to pay for their meagre furnishings, the blue carpet and chamber-set to boot! It was a mark of vulgarity, to Merle's thinking, to wash one's soiled linen in public.

Merle was a blue blood, if one's genealogical hobby were sufficiently strong to stand the tracing back of a half-century or two. On her father's side had been men of wealth and distinction, scholars in their day. To her father this scholarly tendency had descended, but the wealth and distinction were lacking. He was an upright, kindly man, loyal to his girls to the best of his ability, but enveloped in an unworldly mist of study and theory that produced nothing more substantial than a somewhat insufficient income. On her mother's side had been wealth and the culture one naturally associates with it. To Della the scholar's

taste had been handed down, to Merle the culture, with a strong pride and an inborn distaste for the commonplace.

Mrs. Norton's remark set Merle to ransacking her brain for another that should lead the conversation into a more restful channel, when a deafening and jarring crash echoed from the kitchen below. It scared the breath out of Merle, and sent Mrs. Norton flying to the stairs with the small Roy on her arm.

"May! May Norton!! what *have* you done! Are you hurt?" called the dear woman, with no thought for anything, save the safety of her black sheep.

"It 's all right," was the stifled reply. "It 's— Pickles— and the dish towel," came louder from the approaching voice. "That makes two he 's chewed," said May, holding out the grimy remains, "but—I 've taught him a lesson. I balanced the wash-boiler with the wringer and a couple of irons on top, so when he pulled at the towel, down they came. The wringer 's broken,—and it dented the boiler, but the irons are all right!"

"And the dog?" queried Mrs. Norton, to cover a surrendering cough.

May sprang back into the kitchen, gave a worried look about the room, and was much relieved to see an inch or so of yellow tail that emerged from beside the stove leg. Falling prone, she peered under, in-

tending to commiserate with the culprit, but instead gave a blood-curdling yell, so genuine that it precipitated Mrs. Norton and Merle and Grace and even Della from the upper rooms down those back stairs in a manner that would have done justice to May's own.

Alas! Alas! Pickles was docked for life, but the attractiveness of dish towels had died as violent a death as his inch of yellow tail.

The assembled party were lavish in their sympathy; and Pickles offered a forgiving wag of the abbreviated member; but May was inconsolable, even to Grace's kindly, "After all, docked tails are fashionable, you know," and was finally dispatched, wet-eyed and with hysterical hiccoughs, to the grocery, to drown her grief in the purchase of syrup.

Having assisted in this errand, and diverted May until she was her merry self again, Merle returned to her flat somewhat resigned to this new venture, which might after all offer more than it had promised, and quite in the mood to help to get things in running order. But the rooms were vacant save of upheaval; no Della was anywhere visible; and not till she had wandered round several times did Merle come across this note:

"I have a standing invitation from Miss Stein to

take tea and spend the night. Since you feel inclined to suit yourself, I will follow your example. Father works at the laboratory to-night; so you have no one to see to but yourself. Please have the courtesy to keep out of my room and leave my things alone.

"DELL."

Merle tossed the note aside and glanced about the disordered room, while a sickening wave of loneliness and homesickness swept over her. Why was it that she and Della were constantly at cross-roads? Did they need the sweet guiding presence of a mother like Mrs. Norton? Was the lack of sisterly love her fault or Della 's? The picture of Grace comforting the afflicted May rose before her,—the pretty, blonde head nestled against the frousled one, the kindly offer of her handkerchief to wipe away the pathetic tears, and the sisterly affection that forebore reproof and uncomplainingly washed the sink of greasy dishes which Pickles' discipline had delayed. Imagine such a picture as that of her and Della!

There was nothing very inviting to eat; many things had yet to be bought, and Della carried the family purse. "I 'll eat what there is ready or go without," was Merle's resolve as she wandered through the echoing rooms, though a slim supper for

her meant a slim breakfast for her father, and he went early. Well, it was no more than she had painted beforehand, and he would see that her picture of "home" was true to life.

She threw herself on the little cot in her room; and her indignation at Della and the forlornness of this first night spent itself in a flood of tears. The odor of frying flap-jacks floated up from the basement kitchen, and made her hunger the keener. She could hear Mrs. Norton's cheery laugh, the small Roy's baby chatter, May rattling dishes as she skipped back and forth, and the front door close as Grace let her lover in. Every one seemed to fill some sphere, to be loved and needed, but her. She was always lonely, always unhappy, always reaching out with an unsatisfied yearning that found no love to feed on. She pulled the pillow over her head to drown her sobbing and lay there till the light faded, and only shadows filled the room. Then suddenly she heard some one calling her, and sat erect, but before she could disguise the tears in her voice enough to answer, May bounded into the room. With the impetuosity that was in her every breath, she flung herself on the cot and her arms around the sobbing girl.

"Something told me to come up," said the tactless one, "for I was sure I saw—ahem—'Miss Elliot'

get on a car when I was in the store. I know just how you feel,—there 's Pickles' tail "—with a sob and a gulp—" and when mother said she 'd stirred up twice too much batter, and told me to ask if you would n't come down and help us out, I just flew. Will 's here; and Willard Jenks—he 's a neighbor—is coming over later, and Grace said she 'd make us some maple fudge. Just dash your face with cold water, give your hair a lick,—and ' mum 's ' the word."

Who could withstand the irresistible May? Not even the reserved and unhappy Merle, who found herself in a wink of time supping at a merry table with a smiling hostess, who saw nothing amiss in the gray eyes; or if she did she made no sign, but kept her guest's plate piled with golden brown flap-jacks; while the convalescing Pickles sat in honor in Roy's high-chair with his yellow tail in a bandage, licking syrup the while.

IN A FLOOD OF TEARS

CHAPTER II

MERLE'S ADVENTURE

"May I bother you again?"

"It 's no bother, dear," smilingly answered Mrs. Norton; "come in whenever you like, without asking. I told Grace, when I bought this sewing-machine, that there was n't a thing the matter with the old one except that it was out of date; so I intend to get my money's worth out of this one if use will do it. Mrs. Teal often runs down to stitch for an hour or two,—it does lawns and muslins especially well; and I told Mrs. Jordan (her scamp of a husband has left her, and she 's just found some plain sewing to do) to run over any time and use it to her heart's content. Then Bridget often runs up her aprons on it. Of course she brings an odor—not sweet—with her; but I tell the girls the machine can't absorb it, and it does n't take but a moment to air out. I believe sewing-machines are very much like human beings after all—it 's far better for them to wear out than to rust out."

Merle stitched away on her seams, keeping a vigilant eye on the small Roy, for whom revolving wheels possessed a dangerous fascination. "Now, I 'll run down to press out these seams, and to take a look at my beans," she said, presently. "Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Norton?"

"If you *would* just look at mine too, and if they 're baking dry fill them up; it will save me a flight of stairs."

Merle stooped to shoulder Roy, who, with baby divination, well knew what arms were loyal in their opening; and having jounced down the stairs for his special edification, she straddled her laughing charge across the ironing-board, while the obliging Pickles offered his services as horse.

Having doctored her beans after a housewifely inspection, Merle slammed the oven door to, and was just rising to her feet, when a funereal figure loomed up from the dining-room.

"Oh! Good-morning!"

"Good-morning, Mrs. Jones," responded Merle with frigid dignity. Mrs. Jones was an aimless, inefficient woman, who for fifty years had led an absolutely purposeless life,—a species of cousinly parasite, whose weekly visits formed a very substantial skeleton in the closet of long-suffering relatives.

With advancing years Mrs. Jones' itinerary grew shorter in inverse ratio, till it seemed to the long-suffering May as though her mother's pantry, refrigerator, and tea-pot were never free from this well-nigh ubiquitous person. May hated her cordially, and took small pains to conceal it. She once locked her into the pantry when her mother had gone to Boston; she filled the tea-pot with hops; and coming on her unexpectedly in the dingy cellar, foraging in the refrigerator, she nearly guillotined her with its cover. Yet Mrs. Jones never took offence. She was politic enough, too, not to establish dangerous precedents in the way of dish-washing or any similar favor, though May threw numberless opportunities in her path.

Merle, reflecting May's attitude, speedily turned her back on the unwelcome visitor, and banged away on her seams, being careful of pink fingers and yellow tails.

"It 's simply astonishing how capable those girls are," remarked Mrs. Norton to her mother-in-law, otherwise "Ganny," who was up for her weekly visit, as the door closed on Merle. "There is n't anything they can't do, and do well. Della cooks and cleans and sews like a woman, and finds hours to study, too. I suppose such experience is great discipline, but

dear me! she can't be young but once, and 'all work and no play' is n't good for her, I fear. It tends to harden some temperaments."

"And Miss Merle?" questioned Ganny, darning away on a tiny pink sock.

"Merle helps."

"Under protest?"

"Well—yes—perhaps so; but Merle is different. I suspect she suppresses herself with her sister, she is so genial when she is with May," replied Mrs. Norton, loath to admit a fault in a girl to whom the fretful Roy went quite as willingly as to his mother.

"She is very beautiful; I love to look at her; yet there is something about her that does n't just suit," said old-fashioned Ganny.

"I think I know what you mean, I 've noticed it too. It 's an air of reserve, of pride, of indifference—call it what you will—that 's too cold for a girl. It is the result, I fancy, that naturally follows when a sensitive temperament meets with constant misunderstanding, until it creeps into and feeds upon itself. For Merle has a heart, and a very loving one too,—I have seen that numberless times with Roy when she did n't know that I was by. What she needs is appreciation, a loving influence in her life, something, I fear, she has never had,—a purpose too, something to strive for. I can't help feeling that

beauty of face should have its complement in beauty of character."

The girls had indeed proved themselves capable, for the little flat was soon settled, and its machinery in running order. This day was Saturday, and Della had cooked and cleaned and sewed "like a woman." Merle had helped "under protest." She had washed dishes, made beds, run errands, and flown up and down stairs numberless times, for Mrs. Norton had extended the use of her kitchen, and generously shared most of its furnishings.

"Put your beans right in my oven," she said cordially; "there is plenty of room, and it would be a pity for you to run a hot fire all day just for them. Besides I have a notion that beans have a better flavor when baked in a social atmosphere," laughed the kindly woman, whose life was so rich in flavor from its sauce of everyday kindness.

Merle had played second fiddle to Della with unusual docility this Saturday; and having finished by taking a bath and a shampoo, she now sat in the bay window of their little sitting-room, darning stockings, with her glossy hair spread out to dry. She hummed a little tune, and one foot kept time to its rhythm on the rung of a chair.

Della sat near, severely trim and neat, with her hair arranged in the simplest and most unbecoming

way, and not a frill nor a bow anywhere visible on her scholarly person. Two broad, sensible, low-heeled shoes reposed on a hassock, and she rocked slowly back and forth amidst a wilderness of text-books.

"For goodness' sake!" she exclaimed suddenly, "can't you keep still when you see what I am trying to do?"

Merle glanced at her and paused a moment; then the tune and the tattoo began again.

"Did you not hear what I said? Why must you keep drumming and humming when I want to study?"

The humming broke into audible words:

"The lightning breaks across the lakes,
And the wild cataract le-aps in glo-RY!"

There was a prolonged shriek on the last syllable, and the tattoo matched the increase in volume.

"Your manners are getting to be simply insufferable," said Della with suppressed rage. "Who your companions are——"

"The neighborhood is of your own choosing."

"Pardon—the fault is mine. One room has never yet proved large enough for us both, as I should have remembered," said Della, piling up her books. "When I 'm gone, and you taste a little responsibility for the first time in your life, perhaps you 'll look back and realize how little you did to help me."

"I never look back—it 's far too painful; but I look forward often, and just now I 'm counting the days for you to go!"

Merle's eyes met her sister's and never wavered; she was calmness itself; but Della's eyes flashed, and two little spots throbbed over the corners of her mouth. Snatching up the remainder of her books, she marched down the hall, slammed and locked her door. Merle dropped her darning, and no humming returned to her lips. How little it mattered, after all, whether she did her share or not! There was never a moment's peace or pleasure.

She bundled the stockings into her basket, and passed quietly down the hall into her own room. It was dim, for the day had been warm and she had closed the blinds. She threw them open now, and sat down to brush out her drying hair, and to enjoy, if possible, the view.

The neighboring house was an old-fashioned, substantial one, with tall colonial pillars and a broad porch. The grounds were very pretty, and extensive by comparison, the lot being a corner one. Its owner was abroad indefinitely, but it had been leased for some months to a Captain White. He came apparently alone, save for servants, and excited no little curiosity. He was a tall, distinguished looking man, as unbending in manner as in bearing, and it

was understood in very short order that the Captain would not be at home to neighborhood callers. In the course of a few weeks a young and charming wife appeared, certainly young enough to be his daughter, and in fact a bride. Merle had often enjoyed the picture that she made, strolling about the grounds in soft, fluffy lawns, with a magnificent mastiff at her side. The gossips had scarcely recovered from this shock, when a son appeared; a young man of nineteen or so, who, rumor said, had been away at school. Stories soon floated about of his unhappy and lonely life and of the Captain's uncompromising severity.

The blind swung to, and in reaching out to refasten it, Merle speedily bounced back with her flying hair, for beneath the tree, under her window, lay the "White boy." She had seen him before, of course, had passed him many times on the street, and had often wondered if they would ever know each other, and if so, how it would come about. May had been very open in her admiration of him, had even pointed out to Merle how plainly he showed that he was thirsting for their acquaintance, and had coaxed her goddess to unbend and bow in a neighborly way; but Merle had very rigid ideas of propriety, and continued to ignore the "White boy," though it was

STROLLING ABOUT THE GROUNDS

daily becoming more difficult to pass him indifferently than to recognize him modestly as her neighbor.

The pleasure of her view being broken, Merle brushed her hair dry, dressed herself and repaired to the kitchen below in quest of diversion. May was in the throes of dish-washing and baby-tending, and as cross as a disturbed porcupine. Merle's mood matched, and having sympathized with each other in misery, and exchanged sentiments on housework in general and Saturday's in particular, the girls put their heads together to devise some lark that should make amends for a hitherto disastrous day.

"There was ten cents change left from the errands this morning, and if what I've done to-day does n't make it honest to take it, then I'll thieve!" announced Merle savagely, having nearly scalded her eyebrows off in peering into her beans.

"I've got five, and we could go on a regular 'bust' if it was n't for him," said May, shaking a greasy frying pan at the inoffensive baby. "Day—day," cooed Roy, pointing to his carriage, quite unconscious of any disappointment ahead.

"Oh, well, I might as well learn to posses my soul in patience, for babies and dishes will dog me to the grave. Even so sage a philosopher as Emerson, you know, has observed that there is no country under

the sun where they don't wash the pans and spank the babies," observed the student of Emersonian lore.

Merle reflected a moment, and then made several gestures, interspersed with suggestive winks, as a possible avenue of escape dawned upon her, and having decoyed Roy into a pick-a-back ride up the back stairs, to the sitting-room and his mother, with promises of mountains of candy, she threw duty to the four winds, and, hastily escaping out of the back door, soon joined May who was anxiously awaiting her at the corner.

"Let 's invest in a cocoanut, some limes, and a pint of peanuts, and have a treat on the shed roof," suggested Merle. "It 's cool there under the tree, and if we creep round no one can see us."

This shed sheltered the family ash barrels, but its roof was conveniently low, its slant not too perilous, and no inconvenient windows of either house were within range, though it stood close to the dividing fence. An accommodating tree in the Whites' grounds shaded it, a group of lilacs screened it, and the girls often spent whole hours sewing or lounging in its shade.

"Bless me, here 's Willard!" exclaimed May, as a tall, six-footer of a lad loomed in sight.

"Hullo, *qu'est ce que sur le tapis*, inquired the lad with a gallant tip of his cap.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing; it 's the dullest day I ever endured. Merle and I are trying to drown our woes in a few indigestibles."

"I wish I might drown mine as easily. May I inquire when and where the feast will be partaken?"

"On the ash-barrel shed! If that sounds enticing, and your question veiled a hint, you may come—providing you make your contribution, too," added the diplomatic May.

Having safely escaped maternal and infantile eyes, the party climbed the board fence, and disappeared on the shed roof beneath the accommodating tree.

"I 'll stump you to walk that fence with the cocoanut on your head," suggested May, after awhile, athirst for adventure.

"Very well," said Willard, jumping to his feet.

"No! Ladies first," laughed May, snatching the cocoanut and offering it to Merle. "Here, take a lime-pickle in each hand; those Japanese jugglers always carry ballast."

Merle, quite ignorant of May's motives, started out bravely and glided gracefully along the narrow rail, with whispered encouragement from the pair behind. She was just nearing the end and considering the best way to turn, when her eyes suddenly lighted on the recumbent figure of the "White boy" on the ground, just below her. The sight startled

and unnerved her; she felt herself sway, made two or three abortive grabs at a near-by sapling, and fell in an ignominious heap on the wrong side of the fence.

Before she had time to collect herself she saw a lithe figure spring to its feet, and two substantial hands held out to her relief. Disgust at her adventure and wrath at May, whom she at once suspected of foreseeing this result, sent the blood to her cheeks.

"I— May— that is, we—" floundered the unhappy Merle.

"Don't mention it," said the young man, evidently enjoying the encounter. "I thought your trapeze act very graceful, even if you did end by poaching on my preserves."

Merle gave a despairing glance at the fence, which seemed to have miraculously grown in height, and then to the path. But the sight of a heavy cocoanut flying down the concrete walk, followed in hot pursuit by two vulgar pickled limes, was not reassuring.

"I 've been wishing to meet you, Miss Elliot," continued the young man, breaking an awkward pause, and gallently offering his hand. But Merle's dignity had recovered from its shock, and she instantly froze at this familiarity. The knowledge, too, that four merry blue eyes were peering through the interstics of the lilac bush hastened her resolve to

cut short their entertainment. Merle certainly knew his name as well as her own, but she was a true daughter of Eve and knew perfectly how to dissemble.

"You have the advantage of me, I fear," was her booky reply, as she offered tentatively the tips of four pickle-lime moistened fingers.

"My name 's Bob White," said the lad, uncovering, and suppressing a smile.

"Any relation to the Partridge family?" said Merle quickly; "you spoke of poaching."

Bob threw back his head in a peal of merry laughter, and for a moment had the satisfaction of seeing a dimple born in his companion's cheek. This quick appreciation of her joke evidently mollified Merle, for she thawed visibly and said in quite a confidential tone: "I should simply drop dead if your father came out and found me here. I shall have to ask you to let me pass through the grounds and out of the gate."

"The Captain 's away, and Mrs. White too. I 'm horrid lonely—would you mind? I hope it 's not presuming to ask,—but it 's nice and cool on my piazza."

"I 'm not alone. I have company on—on the shed roof."

"I know; I saw Miss May; and you will come if I invite them?"

Merle allowed a decent time for the eavesdroppers to gain the shed, and then called to them. May snapped at the invitation, and speedily appeared on the fence rail with a wet bag of pickled limes in one hand and a pint of peanuts in the other. Willard brought up the rear with a bottle of cheap olives and two stale ginger ales. Merle suppressed any expression of her feelings, but wondered what the "White boy" would think of her and her companions.

After the introductions, while the group were exchanging commonplaces, Merle found time to congratulate herself on a wisdom that had prompted her to put on her light blue gingham, which "V'd slightly at the throat and was very becoming, with a new hair ribbon which matched.

"I'm so glad to meet you all," said Bob, with easy courtesy, having relinquished Willard's hand after a firm grip of friendship. "Being away at school, and my family living here so short a time, I know scarcely any of the young people about here. I suppose I shall fare better next fall at college, now that I live near."

"Shake, I'm a college man too," said Willard.

"Crimson?"

"Shake again."

"I expected some old friends, but they have just

sent me a regret, so I shall feel especially grateful to you all in helping me out of a dull afternoon," said the host leading the way to the piazza.

No group could long suffer from formality where Madcap May figured, and just here she broke all restraint by making a wild dash after the runaway cocoanut. Refusing all offers of assistance, May gave it a sharp crack on the piazza rail. The obliging cocoanut did the expected—likewise the unexpected. It parted in two, it also parted with its milky contents, bestowing the latter in May's pink lap. Nothing daunted, she seized the olive bottle and poked and wrestled with its obstinate cork. The cork finally yielded, but instead of flying out, it flew in, the bottle turned a somersault, and its briny contents decorated what little of her dress the cocoanut had unavoidably left.

"Never mind, brine or lime, whatever it is, sets the color," said May cheerfully, holding out a drenched breadth to the breeze, as she dropped exhausted into her chair. But her rest was short, for a wail from the group sent her flying to her feet, and turning, poor May disclosed a wet bag and four flat and juiceless limes.

"Oh! my precious, precious limes, where has all their juice gone!"

"Just look at the back of you, and you 'll see

where most of it went. Oh May! you 're a sight for gods and men."

"Never mind!" said the unfortunate one, taking a rueful look at her back breadth, "it matches the front, and it 's nice to be consistent, you know. But do let 's eat while there 's something left,—that is, just as soon as our host offers his contribution. This is a Dutch treat, sir, and we 'll give you just five minutes!'

"I 'll do my best, ma'am," and so saying Bob made a military salute and disappeared.

After having nicely dusted every porch chair with her damp back breadth in testing their comfort, May managed to subside. As for Merle, she lounged luxuriously in a fringed hammock, translated to the seventh heaven of bliss. All thought of her hard day and its uncomfortable climax drifted from her mind, and she found ample reason to bless that wily cocoanut. She had had very little merry companionship in her eighteen years,—far too little.

Bob shortly reappeared, bearing a plate of frosted dainties, with a servant in tow, struggling with the weight of an ice-cream freezer. The sight of this upset May's momentary calm, for she dropped to her knees and embraced the freezer with such mock devotion, that the faultless and expressionless John

fled coughing. Bob dished and Merle served, May being discreet enough to keep her fatal fingers out of so sweet a pie.

"How fortunate it was that you were under the tree, and we should choose the shed," observed May, familiarly, pausing at a blissful mouthful. "You were lonely and so were we; and now we 're having a jolly good time. It 's like grammer is n't it? two negatives make an affirmative! When we finish, you must give us some music. Merle loves to hear you practise, and often listens behind her blinds, that is —I mean if she 's dusting round or——"

"I 'll show you over the house if you like, but we 'll leave the music to you ladies," said Bob, ignoring May's confusion and Merle's blush.

Bob led his guests through the rooms, which were well worth inspecting, for the Captain was a much-travelled man, and had many curios of value. Besides, the rooms were newly and elegantly furnished, probably in behalf of the young bride, and Merle found her eyes dilating, in spite of her attempt at well-bred indifference.

"Will you play, Miss Merle?" invited the host when, curios and pictures being exhausted, he led the way to the music room and opened the grand piano.

"I wish I could," said Merle, regretfully. Music was the one passion of her life. Ever since she could remember she had longed for it, but a boarding house had proved a poor place for the cultivation of the æsthetic.

"And you, Miss May?" asked Bob, politely evincing no suprise at Merle's deficiency.

May made no demur, but rattled stormily for a few moments, then willingly relinquished her place to Willard. Willard obligingly dashed off a few selections of the college variety, but gave evidence of a strong inclination to yawn.

"Now you need n't close the piano and think you 're going to wriggle out of it, so don't try. I 've heard you practise and I know what you can do," said May authoratatively. Bob laughed and reluctantly seated himself. Perhaps he had refused out of courtesy to his unaccomplished guest, though a small audience sometimes affected him more than a roomful. He began nervously, but soon lost consciousness of himself. He was very sensitive, and his lonely life had made music dear to him.

Merle sat pillowed on a satin couch, its rich orange making a pleasing background to her blue dress. She was out of range of any eyes, so allowed her own full license. May had wandered to the farther end of the room, and moved restlessly about examin-

ing the curios, while Willard followed, explaining her questioning winks in pantomime.

The luxury of the room's furnishings catered to Merle's artistic sense, yet the sight made a painful contrast with her own plain, poor little home. Her eyes wandered from the rich rugs on the polished floor, the paintings which stood out in bas-relief against a wall of softest green, the heavy cream of the window draperies, the choice and well-placed bric-a-brac, to the mahogany grand piano and the young man seated at the ivory keys. A tiny ray of sunlight, glinting in through the rich draperies, lighted up the well-shaped head with its mass of hair, and brought out sharply the finely cut profile.

Merle's eyes lingered on the face, and she found herself speculating on the rumors she had heard. Was it true, in a home of such luxury, that one could be unhappy, too? Did he know, like herself, what it meant to be unloved, unnecessary, misunderstood? She recalled that during the afternoon he had not once said "my father," but had alluded to that person as "the Captain," and in somewhat distant tones. Something about the face, together with the nature of the music being played, answered Merle's musing, and she felt a sudden wave of sympathy for one who possibly suffered like herself.

The music stopped, the performer wheeled abruptly

round, and the brown eyes surprised the gray ones in their dreamy sympathy. Then the gray eyes were veiled, and the color mounted in Merle's face.

"Is this heathen god a Mohammedan or a Buddhist?" came May's abrupt but never so welcome voice. "He fascinates me; I can't keep my eyes off."

"You 'd far better put them on the clock," laughed Merle, rising, "else our host will have reason to think us some relation to his heathen god!"

"Do you know," continued May with a reluctant sigh, "if I were let loose in this room and could have anything for the choosing, I think I 'd take this little god. He looks dejected;—I have a feeling that somewhere in the past æons his soul was burdened. I think he washed dishes!"

"And you, Miss Merle," laughed Bob, following his guests to the porch, "if you were to be let loose, what would be your choosing?"

"I," said Merle, her eyes avoiding the questioner's, "I should choose your music."

CHAPTER III

CHIEF COOK AND BOTTLE WASHER

Della had packed her modest trunk with still more modest clothes, and had gone. The parting between the sisters was somewhat formal, though Merle had been a model of docility the last few days. Indeed, now that the parting was over, and the plain little figure started down the platform walk, she felt a sudden wave of remorse sweep over her, and for an instant felt like flying after her sister, and wishing her all possible luck in her brave undertaking. But the almost inconceivable relief Merle felt in her going might, perhaps, account for this magnanimity, for to Merle the playing of second fiddle had been a rôle she had never yet filled gracefully.

With a light step and a heart bounding with excitement, then, Merle turned homeward, eager to assume the reigns of domestic government. Her father, with a scholar's distaste for the practical, had readily agreed that she should take Della's place and manage the money, which meant his weekly salary, less a modest deduction for his personal expenses.

Merle set to work with praiseworthy system, paid several bills that were in arrears, and settled with Mrs. Norton for the rent which was likewise behind. She started a housewifely account book, apportioning sums here and there for necessities, and was amazed at the vast amount left for "sundries." She had always felt that Della was a poor manager, and here was proof. Visions of a new dress, a jaunty hat, and a full supply of gloves and ribbons, to say nothing of the realization of a little plan that had simmered in her brain all summer, made ample amends for such housework as would fall to her. Her father breakfasted early and would wait on himself; he had his dinner in the city and often his supper, too, if he worked late; she would afford Bridget once a week, since school was now in session and she must have time to study,—and, well, it really looked as if the house would keep itself.

May exulted in her enrolment as "chief cook and bottle washer," as she expressed it, and was untiring in her help. Dish-washing that dragged downstairs was great fun upstairs; messes that would have turned her freckled nose out of joint at home she here swallowed willingly; banquets were held in these upper rooms several times a week, and candy pulls were of nightly indulgence.

May could not have first met Merle more fittingly

than in the statue shrine on the front stairs. Metaphorically speaking, she had never risen from her knees, but worshipped daily at the feet of a goddess most willing to assume the rôle. Impetuous and frolicsome, unmindful of her dress and dignity, with an ability to shed responsibility as instinctively as a duck sheds water, May, nevertheless, was generous to appreciate what she most lacked. Merle's beauty, a dignity that held her above petty meannesses, a certain aloofness that made the slightest unbending seem a favor, together with her easy scholarship, made her to May a veritable oracle at whose slightest mutterings she strained a willing ear. As for May, she loved study as dearly as a colt loves a halter, and if Providence had kindly allowed her the management of her own affairs, she would have consigned school and its curriculum to the "demnition bow-wows." She wrestled with history and English; floundered in a delusive and miry maze of French irregular verbs; struggled with Civil Government, wishing all the framers of the Constitution, individually and collectively, in a fiery furnace; and came to total shipwreck on the rock of plane geometry, the only "plain" thing about it being, she averred, its invention by Beelzebub. Yet even these struggles were insufficient to curb May's love of fun; as a consequence of which she spent many study hours in the august presence of the

master, to whose sanctum she was often dismissed "to think it over." May did think it over, and, with a repentance as impetuous as her fun, promised to make amends.

Merle was studious, reliable, somewhat serious, reserved, and dignified, with an eye to her "manners" and to the details of her neat and becoming toilet. May, on the contrary, was not serious; she had never been serious for five consecutive minutes; and dignity and reserve found no resting place on this merry, fly-away little woman. Yet, opposite as they were, the two temperaments dovetailed, and a most sweet and enduring friendship was the result.

The plan which Merle had made for herself was put in execution as soon as Della was safely off. It had taken definite form the day her "trapeze act" had led her into such a pleasant afternoon. When Bob had asked her to play, she had hidden her mortification, but she felt keenly his surprise, and the disadvantage at which a girl must appear who could contribute nothing as her share to an entertainment. She could neither dance, play, nor sing; and she decided that her education should be mended at once, at least in one line. Della's presence had made such a step impossible; Della had no sympathy with the æsthetic, not being troubled with cravings in that line herself. She had no faith in Merle's aspirations, and

concerned herself with them only to thwart them. "The very day before she left," mused Merle, "she made fun of me because I was reading *Romola*, and said I was trying to pose because I knew George Eliot was a great writer, and afterward inquired if I had ever heard of Savonarola!" In such an atmosphere music lessons were not to be thought of, but the atmosphere had happily changed, and with it Merle's plan went into effect. Weekly she visited a certain street, pulled a certain door-bell, and disappeared. Later she emerged with sparkling eyes, a quick step, and a heart throbbing beneath the music folded under her coat. It seemed to Merle as if everybody must know it was there; and many were the painful starts she got in making her clandestine pilgrimages. May's bright eyes, she felt, must surely pierce the veil; and she was in daily terror lest Grace should divine that all this practising meant something. But she had drummed more or less all summer; Mrs. Norton was as free with her parlor and its furnishings as with all else; and Grace had often helped her with difficult passages,—difficult, at least, to Merle's inexperience.

For several weeks the housekeeping flourished, and affairs seemed to be moving along on well-oiled wheels. There was no one to "boss" her, no one to wrangle with; a snug little nest-egg, laid by from

the weekly allowance, would soon hatch into the much-needed gown and other things longed for; there were occasional "outings" with the boys home from college, and a daily diet of doughnuts, lemon pie, and soda!

Then suddenly the light died out of her horizon, and the aspect of things was mightily changed. Not that her day turned into night by any Cinderella process, but it turned nevertheless, however subtly, till even the blindest would have owned it night.

The cold weather put an end to out-door frolic; the housework dragged, Bridget not being able to accomplish a week's work in one day; poor May deserted the ranks, not even her love for her goddess enabling her longer to simulate a joy in dish-washing; her school studies became more exacting and made practising a bore; and the occasional outing with the boys had died a natural death. Bob was absorbed in his college, and obliged to attend strictly to business under the parental eye; and Merle had grown shy of accepting favors she could not return in hospitality. She had refused one or two treats, somewhat coldly, and Bob had vowed not to repeat the courtesy, little dreaming that poor Merle had ended her day by crying herself to sleep.

But the last straw on the camel's back came in the mail. It was a letter from Della asking for in-

stant funds. She had learned, to her disgust, that Merle managed the purse strings; and she sarcastically intimated that, now the money was in such efficient hands, doubtless the draft would not be felt. Shamed to admit that the money did not spread out as widely as it promised at first, and in terror lest Della should divine a leakage and find out about the music lessons, Merle mailed her nest-egg, went without her gown, lost heart in everything, and openly rebelled to her father about the housework. She refused to handle the money again, feeling it only fair that he should do some of the planning and face a little of the music of unpaid bills; in short, washed her hands of the whole business, and was thoroughly wretched and unhappy.

Coming home one especially cold day, tired and hungry, Merle tossed her books down in the little sitting-room and looked around. The fire was out, the stove choked with ashes, the floor littered with the evening paper and little paths of sawdust from a leaky hassock, and on the window sill a sticky tumbler. Dust lay on everything, and the atmosphere of the room was forlorn and repellent. In the kitchen the range was fireless, the sink full of dishes, and the pantry innocent of anything tempting. Merle donned her apron, ignoring her empty stomach and aching head, and shook down the parlor stove with

spiteful energy. She shouldered her hod of ashes and soon returned from the cellar with a full hod and some kindling. But the fire must have imbibed some of the generally depressing atmosphere, for it spluttered and died out, leaving nothing but a dirty trail of smoke. Merle gulped down a sob, fished out the charred kindlings and began again, adding a liberal cup of kerosene. "If it blows me up, it 's nothing more than I 'd be thankful for," said the burdened one, viewing her rough and grimy hands.

But the kerosene failed to oblige her in this respect; neither did the kindlings do their duty, for again they crackled and died out, bringing the sobs nearer the surface. Merle had no heart left to start the kitchen range, so put her water on the oil-stove (after filling it) and gained time by throwing the beds together while waiting for it to heat. Returning to her sink of dishes her heart sank within her, for the kitchen presented a sight that was black indeed. The wicks of the stove had been turned too high, and a raven mist of carbon coated every object in the room. The ceiling was a sight for the whitewasher, the curtains fit for the tub, likewise the tablecloth—not a dish, chair, nook, or cranny but was covered with this insidious fall of sooty snow; the kettle might have been the coal-hod, so far as color was concerned, and even the air was tangible.

Merle turned out the light, threw up the windows, and slapped through her sink of dishes in an atmosphere as cold and black as her heart's broodings. Bundling into her coat she returned to the cold sitting-room, and threw herself down beside the bag of books to grind for the examinations which were looming up in near perspective. She hoped her father would come home early and witness her misery, and a moment later, as if in answer to her wish, came the well-known tread stumbling up the dark stairs. Merle remained seated, not opening her door to light his way, but instead turned up her coat collar that she might heighten the effect of her abject condition. Her "Good-evening" was as cold as the room, her air of indifference as forbidding. The sensitive temperament of the Philosopher soon perceived that something was amiss, and he retired to the kitchen.

"He 's always talking about his skill at cooking in camp,—I 'll let him try it to-night, and see how he likes it after a hard day's work," thought Merle bitterly. "It 's no more than I do every day."

She heard her father start the range; soon steak was frying and cocoa boiling. The appetizing odor reached her cold nose, and was not to be withstood. Merle unbent sufficiently to be the silent partner

to the meal, but treated all overtures with injured indifference. At he conclusion of the Quaker meeting she stacked the dishes in the sink with voluble sighs, and, remarking that she had had sufficient dish-washing for one day, caught up one of Scott's novels and started down-stairs to find a little joy, if possible, in visiting May, or at least to thaw out before turning into an icy bed.

In a desperate mood May had locked herself into the library, for the nightmare of examinations spoiled her waking hours, too. The occasional slam of a book, groans, and grating chair-rungs—indicative of physical writhings as an outlet to mental torture—marked May's thorny progress through the path of learning. From the parlor came the subdued hum of the lovers' voices, with now and then a quick little cough—the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Mrs. Norton sat rocking Roy wrapped in a shawl, ten pink toes visible at one end, and at the other his pretty golden head lighted with the soft glow of the shaded lamp. Roy had made his good-night rounds, dispensing liberally from his little "honey-pot," and had taken the express for dreamland. He was nearing his journey's end when Merle's entrance roused him, and he offered a sleepy kiss, moist but loving. Merle accepted the offering with open arms (this was in the good old days before microbes bred

in baby-kisses) and her tired face softened wonderfully.

Mrs. Norton set Roy's train in motion again, and Merle buried herself in her favorite chair and opened her book. Now and then Mrs. Norton glanced at the girl, a glance at once troubled, sympathetic, and full of motherly concern. Her discerning eyes saw a great deal—had been seeing a great deal for some weeks,—and such an opportunity as the present offered was not to be lost.

"Is your book interesting, Merle?"

"Not in the least!"

"Pray, why do you read it then?"

"Why does any one do things she does n't like? We are obliged to read one of Scott's novels and write our opinion of it; as if I, with no notion of literary form, could criticise Scott!" said poor Merle, with some show of reason. "I 'd just as lief have one of Beethoven's symphonies to analyze, and I shall hate Scott for the rest of my life, I know. It 's nothing but work and dirt, study and grind from morning till night. I wish I 'd never been born!" with a suppressed sob.

"What did you have for dinner, Merle?"

"I did n't have any—that is, I had some cocoanut cakes at recess.

"Is your sitting-room warm? did the fire keep?"

"No, it 's out."

"You built it up?"

"I tried to, but I suppose the kindling was damp. It would n't light—I 'm so sick of housekeeping! I knew I'd hate it—it's so hard—when other girls have everything smoothed from their paths, with parents to bribe them to do well,—it 's so hard to have the care and work of a woman, with the studies and requirements of a girl, too. But father can't see it—he can't see anything but his hobbies!" concluded Merle with hysterical sobs that were past control now.

However much Mrs. Norton's heart bled for the girl, however much she longed to open her arms and comfort her with the gift of a life as free and loving as that of her own dear girls, however much she saw the justice of some portion of Merle's complaints, she saw other things too—for Mrs. Norton had *lived*.

"He is a kind father, Merle. Do you ever think of him? Sometimes when I hear him working round and waiting on himself, my heart bleeds for him. All these years since your mother died he has longed for a home. How bitter it must be for him to see that he will never have it."

"I wanted to board."

"Merle, dear, that is the trouble; I 'm going to

speak very plainly. You think too often of that horrid little pronoun, first person, singular. In other words, my dear, I fear that you are selfish. Did you ever think so?"

"If I have n't, it 's not for lack of being reminded. Della 's sung that tune for seventeen years," said Merle with a bitter curl of the lip. "I should be a saint if having my faults held up to view would do it. I 've always felt that a little love would do more."

"Nevertheless," said Mrs. Norton, nearly swept off her guard by her own most cherished precept, "nevertheless, dear, let us look at it just now from your father's standpoint. It is never safe to judge your life by making painful contrasts. You will underestimate your own comforts and pleasures every time. Compare yourself, rather, with some one worse off, instead of better, and then see how much you have to be thankful for. Your father is a very indulgent one; he works early and late for nothing but you girls, and in return he gets a cold, comfortless home, and a complaining daughter. He might have married and brought a little comfort into his own life; though I doubt if a step-mother would have been agreeable to you girls. Perhaps he considered that. If you don't have all the comfort and pretty things you would like, you could work for them,—many girls

do,—yet you know your father would be scandalized at such a step. When it comes to money, you have much more small change than either of my girls. Do you often deny yourself an ice-cream soda, Merle?"

"Not often."

"And don't you generally take the car into Boston with Blanche, and get it at Huyler's?"

"Generally; I have to have a little fun."

"And if you took the money you spend carelessly for candy and needless car-fares, and those detestable lunches at recess" (Mrs. Norton had once visited the school and recalled with a shudder the basement counter groaning with sandwiches innocent of anything but fat, doughnuts, rich and greasy cakes, limes and frosted eclairs, not even a glass of milk to redeem a long line of indigestibles) "don't you think it would amount to enough for you to provide yourself with wholesome dinners?"

"Perhaps."

"And now, my dear, if you should systematize your work, attend to your fires regularly instead of letting the stove get choked with ashes, wash your morning dishes before you leave, and spread up the beds, I 'm sure it would n't take long—then you 'd have the comfort of coming into a tidy house, and the leisure of the afternoon to yourself. Then would it be very hard to get a simple little supper, and to

greet your father with a warm, tidy house and a cheerful presence? You feel that you are not loved, not needed, and you long for a home. Here 's your chance. Home is not a place, dear, but a condition; and it rests with you to make those few rooms bright and homelike. Would n't it be a comfort to feel that you were indispensable to your father, his recompense for a disappointed life, and that the greatest pleasure and reward of his hard day's work he found in his home and the devotion of his daughter? It 's a great comfort and satisfaction, Merle, to feel that you are doing right. Duty is a very sweet word if you interpret it rightly; and as you grow older you will find the need of this interpretation more and more. You have a great many good qualities, dear; it would be a pity to grow cold and selfish and spoil them all. I was talking with Ganny the other day about you. Shall I tell you what she said?—'Merle is very beautiful, I love to look at her, yet there is something about her I don't just like.'"

Merle's eyes filled and she looked away She wanted so much to be loved.

"And do you know how I answered? I said: 'I believe if Merle had the right influence brought into her life, she would make a woman as beautiful in character as in face.' If I try to be that influence, dear, will you try to make that woman?"

Merle made no answer, but rose, saying as she held out her hands, "Shall I lay him in the crib for you?"

"If you please."

Merle took the little limp form in her arms and laid it gently in the crib,—glad perhaps to hide her face as she bent over it. How different these last weeks of neglect looked to her now! Her constant thought of self, of *her* food, *her* clothes, *her* comfort, *her* accomplishments—how selfish she was! She lingered in the dim room, bending over the sleeping boy, while a new resolve, consecrated with a repentant tear or two, awoke in her heart.

"Good-night," she said at last, turning towards the door.

"Come here, my dear."

Merle crossed the room and laid her hand in the offered one, while the other hand and arm went round her waist in a firm and tender clasp.

"Just one thing more, dear. Let me remind you that you have not only an earthly father to think of, but also a Heavenly Father who never misunderstands, who never forgets, who is sorry when you are selfish and proud, who rejoices when you are gentle and helpful. And though you can't do much that is really good for yourself, a little prayer to Him each day will bring you strength to accept cheerfully whatever He sends you,—study, work,

play, pain, pleasure. Rightly used, they all go to the making of a fine character,—the thing best worth striving for. Will you remember this, Merle, dear?"

Merle did not speak, but she looked gravely down into the kindly eyes that were searching her face, and returned the warm pressure of the friendly hand.

Mrs. Norton smiled; and black indeed would be the sheep that found no comfort or inspiration in that loving smile. Even a leopard's spots would try to change under its blessed alchemy.

"I knew I should see what I do see. Good night, dear child."

CHAPTER IV

MAY'S MATERNITY

"Did you ever see such a lucky day!" cried May.

"It certainly does look as if a kind providence had taken our star up into the ascendant."

"Such a string of 'opportunes'! If I were a pessimist I should say it could n't last; being an optimist, I shall make the most of it while it does. Opportune number one,—a perfectly glorious day, a sort of summery oasis in a desert of winter. Number two,—mother decides to go shopping with Grace, and to fit Roy to a pair of shoes—blessed be his little tootsey wootseys! Number three,—just as we are planning an outing that should do justice to the day come these notes. Read me yours again."

"DEAR MERLE,—

"Willard and I met on the highway, and being drunk with the elixir of this weather, planned there and then an outing which should preclude its being

misspent. Please be gracious and help us in our resolve by joining in a tramp up Blue Hill.

"I won't take 'No' for an answer.

"Yours truly,

"Bob."

"Is that all he says? You read it kind of hitchy as if you were skipping."

"You 're getting dreadfully wise, May, for one who poses as such an innocent."

"No special wisdom needed to know that when you and Bob have been on the coolest bowing terms for the last month, he would go properly down on his knees and smooth matters before invoking any favors. But you need n't read it; only do for goodness' sakes treat him decent when he 's so kind and stands up for you, and has such a dull time at home. I heard something about you the other day."

"It must be agreeable, else I should have heard it before now."

"Some of the girls were talking, and they said you were too proud and distant."

"Somebody blundered that that did n't reach me before."

"And Bob said he wished some of the girls would copy you. I heard something more——"

"You 'll burst if you carry round such valuables!"

"Bob said it was refreshing to meet a girl who had some gratitude, and was n't always holding out her hands for favors."

"Did he really say that, May? Oh! I 'm so glad if he has n't misjudged me. I hate to be always misunderstood."

"Then don't be so cold. You know you could be the favorite wherever you put your classical nose, only just as soon as an acquaintance gets to be a little bit friendly, you freeze. I know of a dozen girls who are dying to go with you."

"And don't you know why I freeze, May?"

"Not unless it 's because you 're perfect in all else, and have to have this one blemish to keep you human. It would be dangerous for every one to see your true self and love you as I do!" said May with a significant lift of the brows.

"Don't be a donkey. You know very well you make a dozen friends where I make one, and all the boys would willingly break their necks to serve you."

"They treat me as a proxy. I have lost my identity. I pose as the friend of Merle Elliot, as living in the house with Merle Elliot, as attending the same school with Merle Elliot, et cetera; and one day—don't faint, dear!—I was taken for the sister of Merle Elliot!"

"But seriously, May, don't you know why I

'freeze'? When a friendship gets far enough for a girl to invite me to her home, to ask me to lunch, or to accept this or that favor, then I crawl into my shell and close the door. I can't entertain the way you can. You have a handsome parlor, a smiling mother, a diplomatic sister, a kitchen to make messes in, and a dining-room to eat them in. Imagine my inviting one of the Shaw girls to lunch, as she did me once; and I was foolish enough to go; and now I have to avoid her, because I know she's looking for return favors, which is no more than natural. But how would she feel if I ushered her into my dining-room, alias kitchen, with a sink in one corner, and a table in the other; or into my sitting-room that boasts of nothing but necessities? I try not to envy, but I can't swallow all my pride, and so I find myself more content not to associate with any girl intimately."

"I never think of what I have n't," said May, innocently. "If I like a girl I just enjoy her; but now that you speak of it, I believe several who come here keep servants and live in style as we used to, but I never thought they'd dislike me because we have to do our own work."

"Your position is different from mine, May; besides you can pose a little on your past. I'm unknown, and have to make my own way with nothing

to make it with. You don't realize how much is ready to your hand. I thought the other night when you coaxed me to go up to the church supper, how happy I should be in your place. Wherever you go you 're known and loved for the sake of your father and mother. You 're always welcome, and always at home. No one has made a place for me, May; I have no mother and her circle of friends, no home, except such as I struggle to make myself. It *is* hard sometimes, for I 'd love to have friends——"

"And you deserve to have them, too, dear!" cried May in a spasm of remorse. "And you will some day, you 'll have them all I 'm sure,—home, friends, wealth, and heaps of love! I 'll never talk about you 're being cold again. But really, Merle, now that those exams. are off our hands, could n't we brace up a little, just enough to invite the boys over—I mean downstairs? How 's the dancing?"

"Fine. I should have gone up into the Hall this week if it had n't been closed. Blanche has taught me during recesses, down in the basement where it 's dark. It 's very kind of her, eating her lunch down in that pokey old hole, but we 've 'divvied.' She likes the whites of the eggs, and I like the yolks; and then I 've made it square on those chocolate cocoanut cakes, of course; and she says I waltz fine, and will do very well on the schottish when I have music;

and then, just as I bank on trying it up in the Hall, it 's closed for a week! Do hurry! we ought not to be both half-dressed, if the bell should ring. Which had I better wear? These new shoes pinch, and the old ones are shabby."

"It would n't take me long to decide," said May, with a satisfied glance at her own broad "understandings." "You do look like such a peach, Merle, in that dress! Green just becomes you—and that black velvet yoke, with the pink bow in your hair! Oh, well, once I was taken for your sister!" and May straightened up and marched stiffly across the room with her chin in the air. Coming back, she continued: "I never felt more like having a lark in my life, getting rid of those exams.—and by the way that reminds me of something disagreeable I heard. I sha'n't mention any names, for I 'm really trying to please mother, and not gossip. We were in the main hall, dancing and eating our lunches between whiles. There was a little group of us by the statue at the door, when some of section "D" joined our set. One of the girls—this is where I don't mention names—said, 'I hear Miss Elliot handed in the best French paper, but I 'd rather have the worst than to have it known I 'd cribbed!'"

Merle turned aside and avoided the speaker's eyes, saying,—"And did you fight my battle, May?"

"No, I did n't have time. Miss Shaw flared right up and said, 'Excuse me, I don't know you, and it 's evident you don't know Merle Elliot; if you did you 'd never make such a remark!'"

"What else?" queried Merle with her profile still to the speaker.

"Nothing else. That was the day Sir Tom surprised us, and knocked everything else out of our heads."

"Do tell me how that happened, May; I 've heard a dozen different versions."

"Well, as I said, we were standing by one of the statues eating our lunches, and there were several such groups about the room, when in walked Sir Tom. I had some grape skins lying about the base of the statue, Miss Shaw had a couple of doughnuts, and Blanche had a banana skin and a cheese-rind tucked in a crevice.

"'Young ladies, attention!' ordered Sir Tom.

"Miss Williams wheeled round at the piano, and all those dancing came to a standstill.

"'This Hall was set apart,' continued Tommy, 'and decorated at some expense, for the purpose of bringing the beautiful, the æsthetic into your lives. The yard was designed for your recess, but I have kindly allowed you the use of this Hall, that you might come into the refining influence of a daily con-

tact with its works of art. This beautiful Caryatide—an exact reproduction of those that graced the far famed Erechtheum,—which I supposed was thrilling you with the grace of its curves, with the beauty and sublimity of its pose,—I find soddened by the most perverted use! I find a doughnut on the toe of this most beautiful Caryatide! a cheese rind under her heel! grape skins in the folds of her draperies! and a yellow banana skin in close proximity! Allow me briefly to recapitulate. This Hall was intended for the cultivation of the æsthetic; failing in this it might better close its doors than to subject its treasures to such rank defilement. Young ladies, the Hall will remain closed for one week!'"

"Oh May! you ought to be an actress. I can see and hear Sir Tom in the flesh!"

Rare indeed is the teacher, however kindly and well-beloved, that escapes the indignity of a nickname from a fun-loving audience. And how the names stick from year to year is one of those inexplicable facts, as mysterious as the yearly rolling of marbles, the jumping of ropes, the spinning of tops, that spring from oblivion and fade back into it. In some instances the names are mischievously apropos, in others undeserved. In the case of "Sir Tom," as the master was known in the privacy of dressing-rooms and dim corridors, the name was not indicative,

but was given in contradistinction to that o. a mild, undisciplinary, inefficient little teacher, popularly known as "Tabby."

"Heavens, May! you 're not going to wear that short skirt?"

"Why not? it 's a walking skirt, just right for a tramp."

"Now, May, see here, you 've got to compromise. If you 're going to wear those gun-boats, you 've got to wear a dress long enough to cover them."

"No one will see me; we 're going on the train, and then——"

"The boys will see you; I should think that was enough. Put on your red dress, with a black ribbon for your light hair, and your felt hat with the scarlet quill; that will be stylish and becoming."

"I bow to martyrdom, but if the cows hook me in the red dress, or I get pickled limes on the back and soda on the front, you 'll face my tribunal for me, will you?"

"And there 's another thing, May. Don't sniff every time you pass a fruit-stand, or talk about its being dusty whenever a drug store looms in sight. I want you to be a lady as well as good fun; and you must realize that you 're growing up, and put away childish things. I was simply horrified the other day to meet you eating peanuts; if you 'd had any

eyes you would have observed that Willard did not. Neither does he leap-frog over hydrants any more. He 's in college now, and he knows—there! what did I tell you? and you 're not half dressed!"

"It 's early for the boys; who can it be? Go through the parlor, Merle, and peek out of the draperies. If it *is* the boys, close the hall door, so I can get into the bathroom."

Merle did as directed, observing from her "coign of vantage" that it was not the boys, and grudgingly opened the front door, barricading its entrance by her tall and dignified person.

"How do you do, Miss Elliot. Is Mrs. Norton at home?"

"No, Mrs. Haskell."

"Is Miss Norton?"

"No; she is out."

"O dear! is May?"

"No; that is, I 'll see," corrected Merle, at a loss how to shield May and be truthful in the same breath. "Will you step in and be seated?"

Mrs. Haskell would step in, and did seat herself, for which compliance, agreeably to her invitation, Merle made divers facial contortions when safely screened in the hall gloom.

"Oh, Merle, what does she want?" cried May.

"I have a presentiment—I feel sort of spikey all up my back. It can't be to call?"

"Rather an unseasonable hour, I should think."

"She didn't have anything to return, did she? She's always borrowing."

"Not unless it was the baby in her arms."

"Baby! has she the baby, Merle? I'm doomed, I feel it—I knew this joy couldn't last!"

"Don't be tragic; go in and see what she wants. You've got a tongue in your head; you can say you've got an engagement, can't you?"

"Couldn't I wear my hat and put on one glove, and then she'll see——"

"You might put your hat on; and you can carry the gloves in your hand. Don't seat yourself, act kind of restless, and be quick whatever you do, for the boys may be here any minute!"

May obeyed, at least in the dispatch of her business, for in short order the front door slammed, and Merle turned questioningly. But no May appeared. Wondering what could detain her now that the agony was over, Merle opened the parlor and peered in.

May sat limply in a chair, her arms hanging dejectedly, such utter "dissolution" in every member as would have charmed a gymnastic teacher. Her gloves had fallen to the floor, her hat was knocked

SUCH AN EXPRESSION OF ABJECT MISERY

rakishly to one side, and such an expression of abject misery was on her face that Merle gasped at the sight.

"May! what is the matter! May! don't frighten me like this! What did she want? Did she return anything?"

"She gave me the chance to, with interest!"

"Did she borrow?"

"Yes—me."

"Don't speak in riddles—what is it?"

For answer May raised one limp arm and pointed tragically to the sofa. Merle's eyes followed the indicator, reached the sofa, and rested on a small bundle of lawn and lace.

"May Norton! what do you mean? Have you spoilt all our fun and taken that infant to care for!"

"I had to!"

"When you had promised the boys—and we all banked on it; how could you!"

"Don't scold, it's hard enough already," said poor May with a frog in her throat. "She took Roy off my hands the day all the folks were away and I was invited unexpectedly to the football game. Her nurse has lumbago,—more likely the embargo fever,—and she's been called away herself. She did n't give me a chance to decline; she just took me for granted. I stood on one leg; I watched the

clock; I looked out the window expectantly; but it did n't work."

"Well, it 's no use crying over spilled milk," sighed Merle, making a praiseworthy effort to be generous. " We 'll have to make the best of it, that 's all. Treat it as a joke, laugh it off with the boys, make some candy, and kill the afternoon as best we can."

" Not much. I 'm surprised, after what you just said about our not being children any longer, that you would suggest such a thing. How would it sound, do you think, to have it said that two young college students, inviting their lady friends for a tramp, were beguiled into baby-tending! No thank you— I have sufficient distinction in that line already."

" What do you propose? "

" That I stay and you go, making my excuses as best you can. Say I 'm ill, gone to a funeral, or any other excuse, so that you let me out of it gracefully."

" I can't go alone, and you know it."

" Invite Blanche, then. I 'll have the chance to be generous in two directions," said May with a wicked light in her eyes. " Blanche has been dying to go with Willard for the last month, now here 's her chance."

" It's a wretched mess all round, and the truth will

leak out, and you 'll regret not facing the music for once and all,—see if you don't."

"I 'll face it then, but let me have my way now—for once—there 's a dear—and here—here they are coming."

With all prospect of pleasure gone, and great misgiving as to the wisdom of present plans, Merle caught up her hat, and found herself at the bottom of the front steps explaining to her male escort in voluble but vague terms the unexpected turn of affairs, while her pulse quickened and her cheeks burned with the knowledge that May's owl-like eyes were watching her from behind the window draperies.

Willard's disgust and evident reluctance to wend in the direction of Blanche's, and Bob's pantomime of persuasion, were devoured by the aforesaid owl-like eyes, not without a wave of satisfaction.

The group dwindling in perspective, May turned disconsolately toward the author of the afternoon's dilemma.

"Since I 'm to be a nurse-maid, I might as well enact the part to the letter," she observed, struggling out of the crimson cashmere that had been donned with such joy earlier in the day. As she stood before the mirror, brushing out the long braids despoiled of their ribbons, and now and then shaking

her brush menacingly at the tiny person reflected in the mirror's depths, the ruminating light that smouldered in her blue eyes suddenly leaped into flame, and a smile that would have done justice to the veriest imp companioned it.

Twisting the light hair into a most becoming Psyche knot, and donning one of Grace's long black skirts, May went on a foraging tour through her mother's trinkets, and, the object of her search being found, completed her toilet by putting said object on the third finger of her left hand. Mollified by the prospect of an adventure, May condescended to smile on the twenty pounds of pinky sweetness that lay enmeshed in a nest of lace, although the abstract joys of maternity had been rudely unveiled in May's mind by two very practical years.

Fortunately Mrs. Haskell had left the baby carriage in the back yard, which gave furtherance to May's plans; and having pinned on a fierce-looking walking hat, she speedily appeared on the highway in her new disguise, pushing the crowing infant strapped into the carriage.

"It 's too early for mother and Grace to get back, though they 'd drop dead if they were to see me!" said May with an inward chuckle and an outward skip; "and the boys and Merle have gone on that train." But even in her *abandon*, she hesitated at

the publicity of the highway, and wisely confined herself to quiet streets, emerging later at the back entrance of Franklin Park.

It was warm, unseasonably warm, and, heated and tired by her rapid walk, May dropped into one of the seats, drew out her crocheting, and sat there—a veritable spider waiting for her fly—but apparently a most exemplary housewife,—her hands busied with her crocheting, and her foot quietly rocking the carriage back and forth.

Presently her prey appeared, rounding a boulder of pudding-stone, as the rough quartz which makes this locality so boldly picturesque is popularly known. A tall, stately personage it was, caparisoned in black.

Poor May! how little you dreamed of the tangle she would make in your hastily spun web!

The figure advanced to the settee, wavered, and then, as if in answer to May's unspoken invitation, dropped into its vacancy. Closing her tiny sunshade, and wiping the perspiration from her brow, she remarked:

"How unseasonably warm!"

"Most unseasonable!" replied May in an august tone.

"I feel as if I were tempting providence, but I really must unloose this wrap."

The first tempter of providence smiled a sweet concern, readjusting the carriage robe with a quick and practised hand.

"What a love of a baby!" observed the newcomer, offering the edible end of her sunshade to the gurgling infant. "How old is she?"

"She was born the twenty-fifth," said May with a reminiscent stare at the telegraph pole opposite, "that will make her six months next week."

"Sister?" queried the lady, "she favors you."

"Sister!" ejaculated May.

"Sister's," I said.

"Oh, no; my sister is n't married; she 's mine," announced the spider to the fly.

"Yours! you can't mean it," with well-bred surprise. "Why, pardon me, but really I took you for a young girl. It can't be you 're the mother of that great, bouncing baby!"

"True, nevertheless," said May, gracefully twisting her thread round the finger of the hand that wore the wedding ring, and devoutly hoping that if this weather prevailed above, the recording angels were off on a tramp, too.

"My surprise really borders on rudeness. I beg you to pardon me, madam. After all, it is really refreshing to meet so young and charming a matron —it used to be the rule in my day."

May lingered in her Garden of Eden, every bite at her forbidden fruit being a whet to her imaginative appetite, while Madam proved to be a most inspiring audience, drinking in with avidity every word of the first chapter of this pretty romance.

Doubtless the chapter would have been considerably lengthened, for May's ability in the imaginative line was equal to the credulity of her listener, but for the fact that Madam was suddenly shaken out of her absorption by the merest ripple of a surface chill, which ended in an abortive sneeze, sending its victim to her feet with the remark that she knew she was throwing herself in the very teeth of providence.

May chuckled to herself as the deluded one rounded the pudding-stone boulder, and she spread her net afresh for another catch. But no second fly appeared, and becoming impatient, May rose in quest of new adventure.

Afterward she was not able to tell definitely how it happened. The fact, and not the process, alone took shape. All she knew was that as she wheeled into the shadow of the boulder, a group suddenly blurred her vision, differentiated into four adults, and finally individualized into Merle, Blanche, Bob, and Willard!

Congealed to the spot, May wished that she might be straightway wafted to the land of the antipodes.

Nor was she alone in her discomfort. The angry blood leaped into Merle's cheeks, and her guilty eyes avoided her companions. Blanche, too, was upset by being met face to face under Willard's escort by her late rival; while the boys, too well bred to question, were yet too stunned to try to ease a situation that was momentarily growing more painful.

Of course all this occurred in far less time than it takes in the telling. It was a panorama of dynamic and kaleidoscopic changes, for just as the spikey chills were leaving May's vertebræ, and her quick brain had fashioned a plausible explanation, a stately figure, dressed in black, and carrying a carriage parasol, emerged from the opposite side of the fatal boulder!

May's eyes, round with terror, were divided in their fascinated glare between the oncoming figure and the group of four. She saw Madam readjust her glasses, and hasten on smiling. She saw her shake Bob's hand and pat his shoulder, and she heard, even with her frozen senses,—"My aunt, Mrs. Glines; Miss Elliot, Miss Bolles."

That was all May heard or saw, for after the interchange of commonplaces which had followed the introductions, and happily eased the restraint, Merle turned, somewhat relieved, feeling that the advent

of this newcomer in a measure covered up May's disgrace, when—behold! the path was clear!

Madam was "so disappointed." She too had seen the little woman as she was nearing the group. Such a young mother! really a mere girl! No? Oh yes, —incredible as it seemed,—she had shared her seat but a moment before, and had herself seen the wedding ring. Such a devoted little creature, she would have liked much for the group to have seen her!

If a sudden light of intelligence leaped into the eyes of at least three of that group; if the telegraph pole again became the butt of vacant stares, and if Merle showed a strong impulse to veer away from a thick clump of barberry bushes that studded the path in its bend,—it did not prevent Madam from expatiating on the charms of her settee acquaintance, and on the phenomenal youth of this devoted little mother.

May was not forced to face an open tribunal, but if any doubt were left in her mind as to the efficacy of her barberry screen, it most certainly was dispelled before the following week was out. For the mail presented her with several dozen penny porcelain dolls, dressed as infants; twins, snugly strapped in a dime baby carriage; besides several rubber infants that squeaked most melodiously when

pressed. A broad, brass wedding ring also arrived in a jewel box, and last, but not least suggestive, was a large floral box in which reposed a minature barberry bush in full bloom.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST FLIGHT

Thanksgiving, with its attendant dissipation and dyspepsia, had given place to Christmas expectancy. Merle and May were engrossed in some mysterious enterprise, the alpha and omega of which was secrecy. Poor little Roy nearly flew into convulsions in his effort to solve matters, and his tiny feet were often weary with carrying round his inquisitive little person.

The sinks were filled with neglected dishes; the school bags were unburdened of books; peals of smothered laughter echoed from the rooms above; suggestive nods and winks were accompanied by mysterious spelling, which might have been in English or Hosh Kosh so far as Roy was concerned; and large aprons, bulging into all sorts of suggestive shapes, threw his lordship into spasms of expectancy.

Grace, too, was absorbed in the dreamy joy of her lover's gift, while Mrs. Norton, serene in the

pleasure of her children, pored over receipt books, intending that this Christmas, the first they had passed with the beloved chair empty, should lack no joy her willing hands could compass. Then suddenly into this happy midst a domestic bomb burst, and threw all thought of Christmas to the four winds.

The winter had set in with unusual severity, promising to be more than true to its New England tradition. Grace caught a miserable cold, which furnished an excuse for her cough for a time, as no eyes are half so blind as those that fear to see; but at length love tore off her bandage, and Mrs. Norton's heart stood still. Terrified lest the knowledge that she was failing should work disaster with Grace, fearful lest any pain should sadden the holidays, and yet begrudging every lost day toward some step of help, Mrs. Norton paced her quiet sitting-room when all were tucked safely in their beds, and prayed the dear God to direct her aright, and to spare her from smiling another beloved one into heaven.

Then it chanced that the good old family doctor, who had opened Grace's eyes and closed her father's, chancing to meet the girl while calling at a friend's, took a few, sly professional glances, made a quick exit, and drove straight to Mrs. Norton's.

"Off to the South at once!" Such was the do-

mestic bomb that burst in their midst and scattered all thought of Christmas to the four winds.

Off to the South! With whom? To go with Grace meant double expense to Mrs. Norton; to leave May and Roy was out of the question; to take them equally so. To send Grace alone even would be a severe draft on the family income, for the thrifty business which Mr. Norton had left was making less and less return, now that it was run by another, though Mrs. Norton, with a mother's generous love, had kept this new anxiety locked safely in her own breast. Grace was far too ill, too clinging and dependent in temperament, to make the trip alone, and no obliging relative offered her services.

Into this inflammable state of affairs a second bomb burst, shaking the little house from attic to cellar, and stunning its inmates into such feverish excitement that none knew, till the event was over, whether it were a pleasure or a pain.

It came about in this wise. Will, Grace's betrothed, was suddenly promoted to the road, and his agency for the winter was to be in the South—the very locality the doctor had suggested as most desirable for the invalid. Doubtless Will had a finger in this so opportune pie, for now he came, aglow with the good news, strong in his manhood, loyal to his love, to demand his little bride.

Grace, ignorant of his good news, met him at the door, her pretty face tremulous between smiles and tears, and no lover's greeting on her lips. She and her mother had had many serious talks of late, and she had been brave to agree that the only honorable and womanly act for her was to offer to free the dear one from an engagement that was likely to stretch along a straight and narrow road, with no welcome turning anywhere in sight.

She had intended to be very brave and strong in the telling—quite a Lady Macbeth,—but when she opened the door and looked up into his face, radiant with its new light of joy, she faltered, trembled, and whispered such a heart-broken release that Will caught her to his breast with a masterful joy, more moved by this proof of her love than by all her smiles and pretty wiles.

Mrs. Norton had known Will Shepardson ever since he had pranced about in kilts, and she loved him as one of her own. Besides, he had been approved of the dear father, than which there was no more royal road to Mrs. Norton's heart. Next to her mother's, no arms could be more welcome in their opening to Grace, and Mrs. Norton felt that in the good doctor's timely advice, and in Will's manly and generous proposal, the silent prayers that she had breathed with every step in pacing her little

sitting-room were answered. Certainly she felt no right to waste a moment of the busy days remaining in vain misgiving, or to feel anything but thankfulness for this little ship of safety that had suddenly sailed into her troubled harbor.

A wedding! A wedding in ten days! Such was the family bulletin that upset the daily routine and interrupted the girls in their secret enterprises. Merle deserted her flat and devoted every moment left from her studies to the prospective bride; while May, the impetuous and thoughtless, straightened her round shoulders and suddenly became so much the woman that it brought tears of joy to the fond eyes never too dim with care to rejoice, and confirmed the dying father's trust, "May will live to be your comfort, dear."

Grace was the first little nestling, and was always frail,—two facts that made her very precious to the mother-heart. May felt this, always had felt it, but without the slightest shadow of regret or jealousy. She knew that during her father's long illness and since his death Grace had been the staff upon which her mother leaned; and she knew—no eyes were keener where love prompted their discernment—she knew that however sweet the smile on her mother's lips, however bright the cheer of her voice, this second loss was to her the parting of the ways; and the

longing to fill Grace's place worthily, to be a necessity to her mother, suddenly grew into such firm resolve, that those ten days of excitement and feverish haste, of joy in the bride and pain at the parting, did more for May than months of stormy discipline could have done.

Fortunately a great deal had already been accomplished, which, however, did not prevent there being a great deal more to do, for what bride could spread her wings for a nuptial flight without being ruffled, who had only ten days to preen her plumage in!

Such a hubbub and bustle as there was! the sewing! the cleaning! the cooking! the incessant doorbell ringing with its accompaniment of ill-timed calls; the pessimistic predictions of some friends, the well-wishing of others. What excitement in the receipt of gifts, what shouts of delight or tears of quiet joy in the undoing, what plans and hopes and fears were crowded into those ten days!

May parboiled her fingers with washing dishes, stitched on the machine till she saw flying specks on the wall opposite, ran errands and pulled out bastings till her lithe figure ached with weariness, but never faltered.

Merle loaned a helpful finger to whatever pie was in process of construction, gave many artistic touches and much valuable advice, and showed endless tact in

spiriting the small Roy over troubled waters. Indeed, even his babyship, alive to the general atmosphere of loving helpfulness, did his utmost to equal the occasion. He and Pickles flew together in answer to the postman's ring, and fought literally to the teeth over the precious letters. Often a package came, too large to pass through the door-slide; then it was that Roy stood high on his little tan shoes and clasped the door-knob hard with his two fat fists; then it was that Pickles bided his time, snapped at the package, and bore it triumphantly down the hall, with his ears cocked and his disgraceful tail doing its best to add dignity. The sequel to this act always justified Pickles in his shrewdness, for Roy's wails of regret at not being the privileged bearer of the gift invariably ended in the uncovering of a certain Dresden jar that stood on the left-hand corner of the sitting-room mantel. Gum-drops reposed in this Dresden jar to Pickles' certain knowledge; so, mounting the hassock and directing a stony, unwinking, wholly innocent and imbecile stare at the left-hand corner of the sitting-room mantel, Pickles never failed to provoke the expected,—namely, an explosion of laughter from the family, and the second lifting of the jar's cover.

Pickles had figured in the family history for a year, and was so important a member thereof that I

may be excused for digressing. May had rescued him one memorable day when he lay stunned and bleeding from the cruel blows of his boy master. Red and white and blue with anger, May had sent the boy reeling into the gutter with a blow equalling his own in force and, catching up the cringing little sufferer, had fled home. Here behind the stove, in a snug basket filled with softest linen, May nursed her sufferer through a long convalescence. She bathed his bruised and swollen head, bound up his bleeding paws, and fed him daily on beef juice and cream, which she administered with her mother's solid silver spoons. When, one day, he had so far recovered as to tumble out of his basket, and sit, a trembling little heap, before the kitchen fire, it was considered an event for family rejoicing. It took many days for him to recover from his fright; an approaching voice or hand or foot shrank him up into a little quivering ball of supplication. That voices were meant for anything but curses, hands for anything but blows, feet for anything but kicks, was a discovery that took time. Many days were needed for his addled wits to recover from cruel treatment, and when they did, it took all his dog philosophy to account for such a sudden transformation in his life. As he lay with his snub nose resting on his two paws, and his blue eyes watching May's every mo-

tion with quick intelligence, a great love awoke in his heart for his little mistress, that nothing would ever weaken or still till his own little heart-beats were stilled forever. When he had sufficiently recovered so that he could drag himself about on four weakling legs, May was the scent his wrinkled nose sniffed. He guarded her at meals, silently, asking nothing but the joy of encamping on a fold of her dress, and during the agonies of dish-washing, he often stationed himself between her beloved feet, nothing but the snip of a tail visible from under her long skirts. When she caught up her school bag he flew to the window to be in readiness for her passing "good-by," and howled dismally when she rounded the bend out of sight. Refusing all overtures from the remaining members of the family, Pickles hunted up some memento of his beloved, a slipper, a rubber, or a glove, and dragging it to his basket behind the stove, laid his loyal little heart upon it.

If May had been asked what was the dearest thing she possessed, she would unhesitatingly have said, "Pickles"; and if Pickles had been asked his conception of the difference between hell and heaven he would have said, "My girl mistress."

But enough of Pickles, and back to the grand event.

Mrs. Norton no longer pored over receipts for

pies, puddings, and their near Christmas relatives. Something of far more importance, and much less easy of accomplishment, claimed her immediate attention.

In England there is a certain famous college so desirable for youth of the upper ten that infants of the male persuasion are scarcely allowed to finish their first cry of regret at being thrust into the "vale of tears" before their names are entered on its lists.

In like manner it might be said that Mrs. Norton, the most skilled and accomplished of housewives, no sooner found herself the mother of a little daughter, than she assumed as an indisputable corollary that in the near future a wedding would second this event. A wedding meant a wedding cake, and what occasion could prove so august for the exhibition of one's culinary prowess? Thus for years Mrs. Norton had trained herself in its mysteries, tested many samples, examined many receipts, till her own was so interpolated with after-thoughts, that any normal manuscript reader would have laid down his life—or more likely the manuscript—in despair.

By rights it should have been made many weeks in advance, stored in the depth of some dark pantry, and there allowed to ripen its spicy richness. This enforced omission, more than all else, discounted its assured success.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Norton took what time was left by the forelock, and appeared in her kitchen at six A.M. sharp on the morning following the bomb's explosion. Grace, May, Merle, Roy, and Pickles likewise descended, Bridget was speedily installed, and the day's work began.

Currants were washed and dried; raisins seeded and chopped; citron peeled and shredded; candied orange and fruits appeared from nobody knew where; almonds were blanched and pistachios chopped; molasses was strained; eggs and butter were churned to a creamy whiteness, and every spice that grew on the far-famed shores of Araby was inspected, tasted, sneezed at, and pronounced upon. Moreover, Mrs. Norton, the most loyal of temperance workers, who heretofore had never allowed even the mildest of vinegar ciders to disgrace her mince-meat, openly, and in the full glare of the sunny dining-room bay, tested various vintages and pronounced on their merits with the air of a connoisseur.

Roy held high carnival in his comparative freedom from watchful eyes, purloined whole pocketfuls of citron and candied fruits, and tremblingly braved the gloom of the rat-and-goblin haunted pantry in the eating thereof.

When at last rows of heavy pans (augmented by obliging neighbors) were all carefully lined with

buttered paper, and the oven, after much manipulation of dampers and the insertion of many hand-tests, was pronounced "just fit," then the toothsome ingredients were blended in one rich, distracting whole, and in the good old Southern fashion every member of the household was called on to give her stir of "good wishes."

Bridget beat long and vigorously, and if her good wishes were commensurate with the endurance of her strong arm, then the little bride was rich indeed. Mrs. Norton was not to be outdone by any scion of the kitchen, and her well-trained wrist sent the raisins and citron and candied fruits flying scientifically through the batter. The rest struggled more or less successfully with its heavy richness; even Roy wrestled with its ladle; finally, Pickles sniffed at its fragrance with his cold nose, but being a wise dog went no farther.

All night Mrs. Norton sat at her post while the baking was in progress, with hardly a nod or a catnap to break her vigil. Hours of "slow heat" it needed, and hours of "slow heat" it had. Not until all the stars had hidden their heads, and the winter sun was just peering over the Whites' house, did Mrs. Norton take one last satisfied look at the long line of perfect loaves, with not a refractory raisin, nor burn, nor blemish, and toil up the back stairs to her well-earned rest.

Mrs. Jones lingered on the outskirts during this ten days' upheaval, reveling in the plenteous larder and in the excitement which left her its mistress. She deluded no one as to the helpfulness of her presence save herself and the tender-hearted Mrs. Norton. As for May, Mrs. Jones more than all else came near pulling her down from her throne of high resolve. As it was, May could not withstand the impulse to outwit her now and then; as when, coming upon a pile of goodies secreted for the home-taking, she stuffed the raisins with pepper, smeared the citron with soap, encouraged Pickles in the chewing of her rubbers and bonnet strings, and came very near offering him the bonnet itself, but wisely desisted for fear of preventing the unwelcome one from her nightly leave-taking.

Alas! there was no feverish waiting for the wedding day. It came all too soon, cold and cloudy, with a leaden sky portentous of snow. May flattened her freckled nose many times on the window pane peering out in search of a speck of blue, but even her hopes were dashed when a few pretty little white stars flecked the window glass, and melted out of sight.

The wedding was to be at noon,—a quiet affair, as befitted so sudden a flight, and with the family still in mourning.

Grace had been brave and sweet and womanly through it all, keeping her girlish fears and disappointments locked closely in her own heart. But how different it was from her pretty plans and day dreams!

She had always thought she would be a bride in June, when the air was sweet with blossoms, and with the song of birds nesting like herself. She had never looked upon her marriage as a rupture, for there was the new room, the outcome of such happy plans, which left her home life what it had been, with mother and May and Roy. Now she was to leave them, and the thought that she was ill and might never see the dear ones again made many moments bitter that should have been sweet.

On the morning of the eventful day Mrs. Norton bestirred herself early, in order that this breakfast—perhaps the last meal they would eat together—should equal the occasion. Never had the coffee, usually indulged in on Sundays only, been so rich and pungent, the cream more liberal, the fritters of such golden brown, the syrup of such amber clearness. Never had the prospective bride looked so womanly sweet and winning, never had Mrs. Norton been more smiling, never had May appeared so early in the morning in such immaculate costume, yet something was clearly wrong. The coffee would not "sell"; the fritters

swam almost untasted in their syrup; conversation languished, till May, feeling that longer silence would be fatal, observed, as she wiped her eyes, that were clearly overcome by the heat of the coffee,—"Do—do you feel any different, Grace?"

"I should n't if I was n't going to leave—if I could feel sure—that is if we"—but the tremulous lips got no further.

"It won't seem long, dear; Easter will soon be here, and then you 'll come home all well, and we 'll have a great time scurrying round and fitting up the new room."

"Yes," assented the little bride, though all three whispered in their hearts—"If!"

Roy paused in his sweet revel, and his bright eyes saw Grace's trembling lips, his mother's retreat behind the coffee urn, and May's moist eyes. Something was clearly wrong. Into his two years so much sunshine had been crowded, that the slightest rift in the domestic sky affected his loving little heart like a discord to the music-loving. His lips trembled too, his eyes filled, and he lifted up his voice and wept.

Perhaps it was the best thing that could have happened, for all followed his example, and the overcharged hearts found relief as Mrs. Norton with arms outspread gathered her children to her. Sad

moments they were, though beautiful in a way, for such love of home and family makes life worth the living.

Roy was the first to smile, for he suddenly pointed a little treacled finger to the window, crying,— "May's chrissy! May's chrissy!"

May smiled through her tears too, for sure enough, through days of neglect and cloudy weather, her fragile little alyssum had bloomed. Its honeyed sweetness lay nestled in a cup of green, like flakes of starry snow that, drifting down, were conscious of their beauty and had idled in the melting.

"It teaches me a lesson," said Mrs. Norton, wiping dry her eyes, and falling to on her neglected breakfast. "See how beautifully it has fulfilled its mission, rounded out its little life in beauty. Let us take up our burdens, girls, and see what blossoms will reward the carrying. I will try to be father and mother in one, and to keep the home cheerful and prosperous for you, dear children."

"I will try to get well and not despond, and be a happy, helpful little wife, so that Will can say what papa once said to you, that he loved you more dearly every year."

"I—I won't grumble about the dishes, and I 'm going to take better care of the window flowers papa loved so well" (her father's memory was very dear to

May); "and I 'll try to fill Grace's place, but I can't—I can't—I know I can't!"

May hid her head on her mother's breast, and a second storm threatened the sky, when an opportune knock sounded at the dining-room door. Merle opened it, and stepped shyly in—she had been careful not to intrude on the family during this last meal.

"The bell rang, but I thought you did n't hear, so I went. It was Bob, and he brought these." Merle held out a bunch of hothouse flowers that she had hidden behind her, and continued, while her eyes avoided May's, "Bob said he thought you would accept them from your sister's friend, with his well wishes."

"Sister's friend to fiddlesticks!" muttered May. "A dozen bunches of hothouse flowers to his washwoman would be cheap in his eyes, if *you* opened the door to take them in. I 'm getting where I detest weddings; I know all the signs, and I can see another before I 've a chance to recover from this."

"It was very kind of Bob, and they will help decorate, but of course I can't wear any but Will's," said Grace, caressing the expensive beauties.

"He never left those alone, own up, Merle!" urged May, with the grin of a Cheshire cat, "Forget-me-nots? or Heartsease, dearest?"

"Roses," admitted Merle with a pretty, conscious

color. "He is so generous to his friends, and offers so much I can't take, that I thought it would n't be wrong this once."

"It was n't wrong, dear," said Mrs. Norton with a frown at May and a smile at Merle. "It would have been very rude to refuse such a kindness. The more I see of him, the better I like the lad."

"A most estimable husband in embryo!" observed May, sagely.

"If he carries out his promise, I should say,—'A most estimable husband for some one,'" observed Mrs. Norton. "He is studious at college, and respectful to his father's wishes. I hope, when he does choose, he 'll get some sweet, unselfish girl who can bring a great deal of love and home comfort into his life—he needs it, if all you hear is true."

"I 'll put these in water and arrange them," said Merle, glad of a pretext to escape. She caught the loose flowers into her arms, but before she could free one hand, May sprang to her feet, opened the door with a profound salaam, and made this apparently imbecile remark; "I wonder why owls are all eyes, and bats have none?"

By noon the commotion was over, the bride dressed, the relatives assembled, and the minister in waiting. A very simple affair it was, for no flare of music, no glitter of lights, no over-dressed escort, announced

the entrance of this fair bride, or marred the solemn beauty of her marriage.

She stood in the little bay window, as pure and frail as the softly falling snow without. Mrs. Norton stood near, the quiet tears dropping unchecked in memory of the dear place empty at her side. May held her mother's arm, looking unusually tall in her long white skirt, with a serious light in her blue eyes that gave a sweet and womanly expression to her face.

Merle had taken pains to secrete herself in an out-of-the-way place, but was obliged to leave it in the care of Roy. She, too, made a picture well worth the painting, as she stood gracefully in her simple white lawn, with not a jewel or ribbon, nothing but an exquisite bunch of cardinal roses caught into her belt, upon which Roy leaned his little golden head. He needed all the assurance of her beautiful eyes, and all the living comfort of her warm hand, to pilot him through the ceremony. For the minister's low voice, his mother's tears, and May's one audible swallow, filled his baby heart with evil misgivings.

The snow fell noiselessly without; the minister's voice rose and fell; and Grace's womanly sweet response, and Will's manly one, tied the knot that made them one forever.

Will placed the little circle of gold upon her fin-

ger, the minister closed the Bible and outspread his hands in benediction. Just as his "Amen" floated softly through the room, and Will turned to kiss his little wife, the wind sent the clouds scurrying through the sky, and a bright glint of sunshine fell upon the group in the bay, making a pretty picture, full of hope, a solace to the dear ones left behind who dreaded the vacancy in the home-nest from this "first flight."

CHAPTER VI

A CHRISTMAS BOX

"Shall you remember Bob at Christmas?"

The speaker's eyes remained on her work,—the fashioning of a diminutive red hood,—which she held off critically, only dividing her glance with a flaxen-haired doll which reposed in a scandalously nude state before her. Other dolls' clothes lay about, from tiny, half-finished garments of lawn and lace, distracting little dresses of blue and pink, bronze shoes with ravishing gold buttons, sun-bonnets, perfect even to the puckers in the back, down to the red-riding-hood cloak that May was fashioning, captivating enough to induce any number of wolves to quit their hiding-place.

Although only a few days remained before Christmas, the girls had decided to accomplish what they could of the enterprise that had been so suddenly interrupted by Grace's marriage.

On the night in question Mrs. Norton had gone to call upon one of the neighbors, which left the girls

mistress of the cozy sitting-room, with its cheerful open grate, and the big centre table laden with their litter of work, over which the shaded lamp shed its soft light.

The workers were in earnest, which accounted for the scarcity of conversation, although May had made several desperate attempts to lead the talk up to a certain point, offering the most inviting of baits, at which her companion had never once so much as nibbled.

Several things had occurred of late that had opened May's eyes, and what she did n't actually see her fertile brain more than supplied. She wished that Merle would be confidential and talk; but Merle had an effective way of creeping into her shell when any one came too near; which, perhaps, after all, accounted for her worshipful following and the stability of her throne.

At length May, worn out with her discretion, suddenly gave way to her natural impetuosity and launched her question into the conversational vacuum:

"*Shall* you remember Bob at Christmas?"

"I don't know. I 've balanced pros and cons until I 'm tired, and I think I 'll end the matter by asking your mother."

May yawned, and stretched out her long limbs to

the crackling fire. Obviously the question was not vital, and its answer still less so. Inwardly she suppressed her joy at her diplomatic move, and glanced quizically at the lamb-like mood of her prey, whom she had expected to anger into a porcupine with every quill on the defensive.

"Of course I always remember Willard; but then, that 's different. We 've grown up together, you see. Still, Bob 's a neighbor, and I know mother feels indebted to him, for there 's the flowers for the wedding, and then he saved Roy from falling into the sewer that day they opened up the street. If it had only been a pretty river instead of the sewer, and you instead of Roy, it would sound more like the right stuff for a book; but it *was* a sew, and a terribly smelly one at that, so it will have to make up in fact what it lacks in fiction," said May, unable to suppress a smile of satisfaction at her phrasing.

"I should be glad to remember him with some simple thing," said Merle. "He knows, I think, that I have n't much money; and we both owe him for some good times,—I for the first I ever had,—but you see it would be so dreadfully mortifying if he did n't remember me."

"There is n't any danger of that. Willard says he has done no end of quizzing at the gymnasium, and that 's what set me thinking."

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"I like Christmas best when we just *give*, and don't *exchange*. I hate all this balancing and surmising; it kills the true spirit."

"I think anything Bob gives will be with the true spirit. He has n't many friends——"

"Thanks to his father."

"And those he has he is especially fond of—some in particular. Did it ever occur to you?"

"Did what occur?"

"That Bob is very fond of—of some people?"

"He 'd be different from everybody else if he was n't."

"Do you include yourself in that? Are you particularly fond of any one?"

"Certainly."

"Would it be asking too much for the name of this honored creature?"

"You, dear."

The little red-riding cloak dropped to the floor. Fortunate it was that its doll possessor lay in safety on the table, or she too would have dropped, as May embraced the speaker in a burst of gratitude. It was very unusual for Merle to unbend, more unusual still for her to express any warmth of feeling.

"I won't plague you any more. You 're the dearest kind of a turtle, or you 'd have snapped long ago. As it is, you 've hoisted me with my own

petard (is n't that the right way to use that?) but it 's had such a sweet ending—Goodness! there 's the bell—it can't be mother; she has her key. Probably it 's—Mrs. Jones."

Merle rose, gave a hasty glance in the mirror, settled the blue bows in her glossy waves of hair, and then, as male voices were heard in parley, swept sundry unnamable garments under a paper, tossed a pillow over the dolls, and sat industriously bending over her work, apparently absorbed to the exclusion of all else, as the door opened and two tall lads appeared on the threshold.

"Good evening, Industrious! We came to see if we could n't entice you girls out on the double-runner. The moon is full, and the hill is perfect; but just as I put the question," said Willard, "May has the indiscretion to sneeze and cough, which leaves a fellow to infer she has a cold."

"She *has* a cold, and I don't believe it would be prudent to go out; besides, although it may not sound cordial, we 're rushed to death," said Merle with a wave toward the littered table. "But stay and toast, if you like."

"A moon and coasting without, a crackling fire and two—ahem—girls within. What 's your choice, Bob?"

Bob wriggled out of his ulster for answer, and

Merle pushed the lounging chair in front of the grate, fluffed up its cushons, and held out her hands for his coat and hat.

This gracious act of welcome warmed the cockles of Bob's heart, used as he was to the indifference of the maids at home. He had no mother to spoil him, no one to do the pretty nothings that cost only the heart's love. Sensitive and affectionate, he would have responded warmly to the influence of such a home, and the love of father and mother; but this he had never had, and since his father's marriage in particular, he was often made to feel unwelcome.

The home atmosphere of the cozy little sitting-room appealed to Bob as it had to Merle, while the armchair freshened for his comfort, the tall girl with hands outstretched and a smile of welcome, confirmed Bob in a conclusion he was fast forming. He exulted in his heavy ulster that made it possible to touch these outstretched hands in the transfer, and perhaps he showed something of his pleasure as he looked down at the little helper before him. Something it was that sent Merle hastily into the hall, something, too, that evidently May had seen, and which accounted perhaps for her shaking her fist at a black derby and a gray ulster, after which she peered out of the hall window, and inconsistently

hoped that her mother would find her call agreeable and lengthen her stay.

"Of course you 're dying to know what we 're doing, so I 'll save your asking. Merle——"

"Don't be personal."

"Merle thought it would be nice to do something generous outside of friends, to remember some charity that 's well organized and no chance of humbug you know, and so we decided on the Children's Hospital. We 're going to make up a box and take it there ourselves Christmas morning, so as to see the children's fun. We are dressing dolls; Blanche and the girls have promised us various things; and then all these pictures that we have cut out, are pasted into books made of different colored cartridge paper. They 're really artistic."

"Go on with your sewing, and let us paste."

"Just the thing," laughed Merle. "Make yourselves useful and help us out in our rush."

The fire crackled and sputtered as if vying with the merry flow of talk and laughter, as the girls donned thimbles and threaded needles, and the boys flourished shears and paste brushes.

"We wanted to add books and some paper-doll furniture,—Merle saw such a love of a set,—but funds gave out, and we had to content ourselves with this."

"Might I ask if males are debarred from contributing to this noble enterprise?" questioned Bob.

"We might let them contribute, as their Christmas gift to us!" announced May, seeing a possible solution to a difficult problem.

"Would n't that be a scheme for all four—just to contribute to the box instead of remembering one another!" hastily seconded Merle.

"There 's mine," said Bob, laying a crisp bill in the centre of the table. "Is it a go?" His query was general, but his eyes questioned Merle.

"As your Christmas gift to us—yes."

"It 's a hard condition and takes away what would have been a great pleasure," pleaded Bob.

"Nevertheless the condition prevails, and any self-sacrifice that it entails adds greatly to its value!" came the fiat from headquarters, as Merle smilingly added her contribution. The pool being complete, the four crossed hands over it as a pledge to their compact.

"One condition more," urged Bob, holding the hand that rested lightly in his, "one concession more, please. Let us go with you Christmas morning to carry the box and share your pleasure in the giving."

"Resolved," said May in a sonorous voice, "resolved, that the four members now joining hands shall convey *in toto* the Christmas box to the Child-

ren's Hospital, December twenty-fifth, early in the morning. Those in favor please say 'aye'—those opposed? It is a vote!"

May took her seat amidst a storm of applause, and work was resumed.

That night, after the door had closed on the callers and Merle had gone up to her room, she stood for a moment by the darkened window, smiling at the remembered pleasure of her evening, and incidentally listening to Bob's retreating footsteps. Presently the heavy front door slammed, and in a moment a light glimmered in his room,—then the shades were drawn. Merle followed suit, lighted the gas, and, leaning her elbows on the little blue bureau, studied herself earnestly in its glass. The result was evidently satisfactory, for she smiled, and leaning forward, kissed the pretty lips reflected therein. Then her face clouded.

"I always have to discount my pleasures. I hate to hurt him," she mused, "and I know it 's only natural and decent for me to invite him to call up here. Even May, familiar as she is with Willard, never forgets that courtesy, but I can't—I can't! I 'd rather never see him again than endure seeing him try not to see how plain my poor little sitting-room is. He 's kind and generous, but a blue-blood every inch, and I can't and I won't endure his pity. What

he thinks I don't know,—and don't care; I shall always have to be misjudged, and one time more or less does n't matter."

Merle wiped her eyes, a need seemingly inconsistent with the tenor of her musing, turned out her light, and throwing up the window stood looking out, probably at the moon which was full. Strange! but another moon worshipper was leaning out of the opwindow; and Merle, whose eyes should have been on the heavens, and not on casements, gave quite a Juliettesque start as this near-by Romeo came to view.

"Good-night," called the apparition.

"Good-night,"—in a faint echo.

"Don't stand there and take cold"; with which very unpoetical, but eminently practical, advice Romeo closed his casement.

Christmas morning, bright and early, a party of four were seen plodding along through the deep snow. Two were young girls, tall, rosy cheeked, and certainly pretty, else why did passers-by forget their manners, and turn to look again? Two tall, college-stamped young men followed in the girls' footsteps, carrying a large box which the day sufficiently explained. The four halted before a brick building, climbed a flight of stairs, and disappeared behind a swinging door.

In a twinkling they were in parley with a trim little nurse; her cap and kerchief, cuffs and apron, as dazzling as the snow without. Merle made a dignified little speech of presentation, wondering at the number of frogs that had suddenly leaped into her throat, while Bob and Willard duly lifted the box into evidence.

Nurse knit her brows, hesitated a moment, and then laid a kind hand on each of the girls.

"My dears, it was so sweet in you to take all this trouble that it is very hard for me to say what I 'm going to. Perhaps it would seem kinder not to do it; but I always feel that in the end truth is best. You see, though your gift is so early, the fact is that the children already have more, much more, than they can possibly use. We have already stored some of the gifts in the attic. Of course, if you feel dreadfully disappointed, you can leave it, but if you know of any other children you 'd better give it to them."

The girls stood petrified—all their work refused?—why it was like a slap in the face in return for a caress! All the eager light died out of their eyes, and the blood burned in Merle's cheeks. Willard, feeling the situation a little warm, lounged over to the window, but Bob stood his ground firmly, and was the first to recover.

The girls' disappointment he resented, and the nurse whom he had at first thought charming was suddenly metamorphosed into a being as stiff and cold as her linen.

"We certainly can find some one else that will appreciate it, girls. Good-morning." And shouldering the box, the four passed out too stunned for apology.

"Serves me right," said Merle in the corridor. "I thought it would be nice to do something big—you always hear of fine ladies going round with fat parcels to this and that charity—it seemed more than to do quietly for some obscure person."

"Excuse me—I did n't see you, the hall is so dim,—but could I trouble you to tell me what car will take me to the General Hospital?"

The speaker was a little woman, worn and pale, with big anxious eyes, and thin nervous hands that folded and unfolded the shawl about her. She was evidently distressed, which accounted for her colliding with May far more than the dimness of the hall.

"The General Hospital is on the other side of the city. I think a cross-town car would take her,—would n't it?" said Bob.

"You see I was so upset," said the woman, "I did n't rightly hear what the man said, and I have come to the wrong hospital."

"It 's too bad if your time is precious. Have you any one ill?" questioned May, kindly.

"My husband. He expected to be late last night; he 's teamster, and the work 's heavy in holiday time; but he did n't come and he did n't come, and I walked the floor, I was that worried. This morning a man came and he said my husband was prostrated with the late work and the cold, and for me to come at once to the hospital."

"Oh, I 'm so sorry! what can we do?" asked Merle, eagerly.

"I spent all my change getting here; if you would be so kind as to lend me enough to get to the right hospital, I 'll give you my wedding ring—though I never had it off before; and I 'd like enough to get back home, for the children—poor dears, it will be a sad Christmas for them."

"We don't want any security," said Bob, kindly, diving into his pockets; "but we 'll take your name and address."

"Why!" exclaimed May, as the address was given, "you live quite near us—have you children—how many—what kind?"

"Four little girls, miss; thank you, sir, and this car, you say, will take me? Thank you, thank you all; good-morning."

"Number 17, Flint Street; that's our destination,

lads and lassies," said Merle. "She 's true blue, that woman. She never said, 'God bless you,' once; and we may yet thank that dreadful nurse for refusing our gift."

"I 've rung twice, and this is certainly No. 17," said May, scanning the windows of a tenement house. Suddenly the top of a disheveled head appeared over the window sill, followed by two frightened black eyes. "Who 's there?" said a small voice.

"It 's some young ladies, dear, who know your mamma. It 's all right, come and open the door."

The four stumbled up into a dark, stuffy hall, heavy with the combined odors of living and cooking, and into a small room to which the owner of the black hair and eyes led them. She might have been ten, this head of the family,—a pretty, delicate little girl, who mothered the three small children as they clung to her skirts, and eyed the strangers.

Merle covered her aristocratic nose from the overpowering odors, but her proud eyes winced at the poor, struggling makeshifts everywhere visible. Her glance wandered from the bare floor to the four shivering little girls, swept across the empty breakfast table and cold stove, and paused at four little black stockings that hung limp behind its funnel. Then they filled,—those proud gray eyes.

"Santa Claus did n't come," piped one little voice, in response to May's overtures.

"And daddy said he 'd come, sure, because the strike is over."

"But he did n't," added the third, pointing to the unmistakably empty stockings.

"We met him on the way, dear; and he gave us this to bring; the snow was so heavy last night he could n't get here with his reindeer," said Merle with a smile, pointing to the box.

Four pairs of dark, awed eyes lighted up; four little mouths were compressed and breathless, as Bob set down the mysterious box, and wrenched off its cover.

May folded back the paper, and there lay Red Riding Hood in her scarlet cloak, Matilda Jane in her white sunbonnet, Susan Marie in a cloud of blue, and Annabella May in a mist of pink.

Four pairs of little arms were folded on four little breasts; four little legs were drawn up, leaving their owners but one to stand on, and four ecstatic "Ohs!" left these little pelicans breathless.

Four happier little girls it would have been hard to find when the bottom of the box was gained, and its contents distributed; and four happier young people it would have been harder to find than Merle and May, Bob and Willard, as they watched the pretty scene before them.

"It 's so fortunate we decided not to spend that money, but meant to ask nurse what to do with it. Now we can get them some breakfast and make them comfortable until their mother comes," said Merle, after going on a foraging tour, and finding the pantry bare and the wood and coal box empty.

"Would n't it be nice to buy them a Christmas turkey!" whispered May, to whom the rôle of Lady Bountiful came naturally from her dear mother's example.

"I have n't the slightest idea what a turkey costs, but I know these children need some breakfast and a warm room. Skip home, May,—it is n't far,—and let your mother do the deciding, then come back as soon as you can."

May and her escort accordingly departed, leaving Merle and Bob to set things to rights.

Merle's sympathies were at once enlisted, because though poor, everything was neat. The floor was as clean as brush and water could make it, also the table with its covering of enamel cloth; the stove was blacked and the ashes emptied; and even the little girls, though untidy from their mother's sudden call from home, had clean aprons lying ready on the chairs.

Merle armed herself with a basin of water and a hair-brush, and proceeded to put the four through

a vigorous scrubbing. Bob chopped up the box into kindlings, and laid the fire ready for the coal. His work ended, he leaned against the mantel and watched operations. Just at present Merle appeared at her best, and Bob found himself wondering if every girl could adapt herself so easily to whatever situation she was called as Merle. Whether she were walking a board fence, presiding in a parlor, taking a tramp, sewing doll's clothes, or tending dirty children, she was always Merle, with just enough dignity to redeem the situation, and not enough to make her a prude.

Whatever else Merle lacked of good qualities, her love of children was unmistakable. With them she was demonstrative, yielding, tactful, and affectionate; and little children clung to her as instinctively as a bee to clover.

Bob watched her ministrations, which brought the dirty little faces out pink and sweet, freed the frousled heads from their tangles, and encased the wriggling little bodies—all arms it seemed to him—in the spandy clean aprons.

"I have a new name for you," he said smiling, as the last pair of black legs wended to the coveted corner of toys,—"I shall call you 'The Madonna of the Wash Tub'!"

"Do your Madonnas clean hair-brushes?"

laughed Merle, glancing up from her very practical work. Then, sobering suddenly,—"What makes you stay any longer and spoil your day? I can finish now; go home and enjoy yourself."

"Do I deserve that?"

"Oh dear, I did n't mean it that way. How could I imply that you had n't helped with your whole heart, when you 've been the prime mover all the morning?" said Merle with true regret. Had n't it been Bob who alone had had the wit to make a dignified exit at the Hospital? had n't his hand been the first to go into his pocket? and was n't it his arm that helped the poor woman through the deep gutter, and lifted her in her shabby, old-fashioned shawl on to the car she needed? And had n't Merle contrasted Bob with a certain other gentleman present, somewhat to the other's disparagement?

"I did n't mean to imply that you were not sincere," continued Merle, apologetically; "I only meant that all this suffering and want does n't shock me as it must you."

"It does n't shock me at all, except to shake me out of my selfishness, and to make me ashamed that such suffering exists only just across the way."

"They say when one is drowning, a panorama of one's evil acts passes in review. Do you know, as I stepped into this bare, cold room, with those four

frightened little children, I had some such feeling. My own complaints and pride seemed wicked. Mrs. Norton says it 's never wise to contrast yourself with those above you in wealth, but to look at those who have less, and be thankful for your blessings. She 's right," added Merle.

"Wealth does n't bring everything," returned Bob.

"No, I suppose not, but most of us are willing to take what it does bring. Don't philosophize, you old Crœsus; go home and enjoy yourself, as I said, and stop looking morose."

"I feel morose."

"I don't believe you have any right to, but if you have, and if it would be a relief to speak—though I have the name of being cold——"

"The Captain and Mrs. White left last night for the South. It does n't matter—only I had the chance to spend the holidays agreeably with friends, and I gave up the pleasure because it seemed only decent to be at home." Bob's voice grew strained, and he ahemed and coughed with a man's distaste for emotion.

"Then I *am* sorry," said Merle with ready sympathy, "and I 'll take back what I said."

"I 'm a kid when it comes to being lorded over and taken to task, but if I show any feeling, any

sensibility, then I 'm a man. If I do right, I get no thanks; if I do the least wrong, I hear from it—never doubt. What 's the use of a fellow being decent when nobody cares? "

" Oh, somebody does care, I 'm sure, Bob Your father, though he may not show it, and your friends. Mrs. Norton speaks so highly of you, and May and I care, if that is any satisfaction."

" How much do you care, Merle? "

" Oh, it is n't measurable; I just do care, Bob. I 'm sorry for any one who is n't happy at home, and though I don't often make personal confidences, perhaps you know the same is true of me. I used to feel it thankless work doing my duty, and I do yet some days; but dear Mrs. Norton has helped me so much that I 'm really getting (I know it sounds prosy) so that at times there is a kind of satisfaction in doing right, just for right's sake. It 's uphill work, I admit, and I have many backslidings; but with such a helpful influence as Mrs. Norton's "—Merle stopped, surprised at her own confidence; but Bob, keenly alive to the intimacy of the moment, and more surprised than Merle herself at this sudden unbending, wisely kept his surprise and pleasure to himself, and said after an introspective pause, " Every one needs an influence for good in his life, especially a young man; it is n't all easy

sailing to be decent; I think I 'll take you for my mentor, Merle."

"No mentor, only a friend, helpful if she may be, but human and failing, Bob. You 'd better take something more stable," said Merle, suddenly conscious of her woman's power.

"I 'll take you just as you are, you willing," said Bob; "and you might give me a talisman to wear like the old Scottish chiefs. I 've been admiring those pinks in your dress all the morning."

"What color will you have?" laughed Merle, indulgently; "red, white, and one cream with red splashes."

"You choose, please."

"Then I 'll give you the striped one. It shall signify the double regard your young neighbors hold you in."

Bob offered his coat lapel, but Merle hesitated; then, remembering that the day was full of disappointment for him, with an empty house and the prospect of a lonely dinner, she relented and, smiling, reached up and pinned the little talisman in place.

Perhaps it was just as well that Merle kept her eyes on her work, though her color deepened; but Bob, suddenly bewitched out of his discretion, covered the slim little hand and the pink with his own, and said in a voice that would grow fervent in spite of

him, "You know that the cream color, the whole foundation of the pink, represents you, but I 'll please you and let the little red splashes be May."

"Who 's taking my name in vain? Talk of an angel, and you hear the flapping of his wings; and there 's another version yet, which I hope is n't mine," announced May, bursting into the kitchen with an armful of bundles, while Willard brought up the rear dragging Roy's new express cart.

"Here, first and foremost, is this," continued May, throwing a cord round Merle's neck, on which a suggestive pendant hung. "Mamma says you must smell of it often, because the whooping cough is round, and you never can tell in these houses" (sinking her voice) "what germs are in the air. Turkey is too high; mother said coal was more essential, and after that staples. She put in a couple of mince-pies and some tea, and said she 'd make deficiencies up later, but could n't leave now on account of the turkey, Bridget being so unreliable. She said we could fix up nice, and then leave the mother to enjoy the surprise alone," after which voluble directions, May took a precautionary sniff at her camphor bag and subsided.

In a twinkling provisions were packed away, a fire was started, and Merle had administered bread and milk to the four hungry pelicans.

Bob meanwhile was directing the arrival of the coal, Merle inspecting a round of beef with a housewifely air, while May pirouetted round the kitchen, balancing a mince-pie in each hand as Willard peeled onions under her directions, wept real tears, and afforded her ladyship endless fun.

The room warm, the stew simmering, the four little girls snug and happy, the four angels in overcoats closed the door and sped for home.

"There is only one thing wrong with this day," said May, running and sliding in the snow like a girl of ten. "Mother is terribly exercised because there are thirteen of us to sit down to dinner. I should ask you, Bob, to help us out as a favor; and it seems appropriate, too, for us four to be together, only I'm afraid it would seem flat to you with all your——

"Say 'yes'; do, please," whispered Merle.

"Don't dangle that bait in my face again, unless you plan on making a catch!" laughed Bob; and May, greatly surprised, nevertheless had the courtesy to repeat her invitation, though she did not know why Bob was able to leave his home and dine out on this day of days.

That night, as Merle lay thinking in her little blue bed, watching the twinkling stars through her window, and marvelling at the day's pleasures, she

rehearsed a few important points and checked them off on her fingers.

"First I wrote a kind letter to Della, and told her I was sorry she could n't come home for the holidays; second, I tried to think of somebody besides myself when I planned the Christmas box, though I needed the money for gloves and collars; and third—third, I helped Bob out of a wretched day." The last was evidently not an onerous task, for the dreamer smiled, winked at a star, and disappeared under the bed-clothes; where she murmured a few fervent thanks to her Heavenly Father before she went to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

THE CONJUGATION OF A VERB

"Where is Merle this afternoon?"

"Upstairs working, I suppose—will it matter if I darn Roy's stockings with black? there is n't any more tan."

May sat beside her mother in the sitting-room bay, the basket of Saturday's mending between them. She had not forgotten her resolve to try to fill the dear sister's place, and the disposition of the Christmas box had been followed by many praiseworthy, if sometimes abortive, attempts at helpfulness.

This afternoon, in particular, she took a pardonable pride in her Spartan self-sacrifice, for the skating was fine, several of the boys had called and begged for her company, and the recollection of her firm refusal glorified the sewing-on of buttons and the darning of hose. Yet, like most martyrs, May hoped her ordeal was known to men, and certainly had no weak inclinings to hide her light under a bushel. She had been expecting some word of praise, some evidence on the maternal side of her usefulness, when her

mother 's question sent her train of thought in an entirely different and unpleasant direction.

"It occurs to me," continued Mrs. Norton, the deciding of black or tan in no way interrupting the sequence of her thought, "now that I think of it, I have n't seen Merle, to speak to, for several days. Is the work dragging, or are those wretched examinations looming up again?"

"Something to do with an exam., I believe," said May, with more truth in her remark than was meant to be evident.

"It can 't be that you girls have had any misunderstanding? you think too much of each other to allow anything to come between you."

"Hark! Roy is calling," said the diplomatic one, showing unusual sisterly concern.

Mrs. Norton rose, not without some glimmer of light however, for though May usually succeeded in covering her machinations by the most adroit maneuvres, Mrs. Norton now suddenly smelled a rat, and not only smelled him, but heard him nibble, though she quietly laid down her mending and left the room without further words.

Roy was undergoing the Saturday afternoon ordeal of bathing, an experience violently antagonistic to his lordship 's inclinings. It took all the maternal diplomacy, augmented by an entire fleet of

sailing vessels and a box of magnetic fishes, to assuage his fears, and to induce this small scion of the House of Norton to sit and soak, a corollary that Mrs. Norton felt necessary to the fulfilment of the golden rule.

Having once got the scent of the afore-mentioned rat and heard his nibbling, Mrs. Norton quietly set to work to locate him definitely. All through the week she heard him nibble, though she set no trap. She heard him nibble when Merle set off alone to school, and May idly lingered till a safe distance intervened; she heard him nibble when Merle remained all the evening upstairs, and May as studiously remained down; she heard him nibble and almost saw his tail when the two, having made a fatal estimate as to each other 's whereabouts, met suddenly and uncomfortably in the hall.

Having thus defined his whereabouts, Mrs. Norton baited her trap with her most skilfully toasted cheese, and awaited her catch. It came unexpectedly, one night when May posted off alone to some sociable, and Merle, tired and heart-sick of her long seclusion, braved the chance of being cornered and rapped gently on Mrs. Norton's sitting-room door.

"Who is it?"

"Merle."

"Come in, dear; you 're *such* a stranger" (first

whiff of cheese) "and I 'm so lonely with Grace gone, and May 's off to-night too."

Merle raised her eyebrows in polite surprise, and dropped listlessly into her favorite chair. She looked pale and tired, and the pretty eyes had a hungry look that went straight to Mrs. Norton's heart. She longed to take her in her arms and let her cry out her pride, and make everything all smooth and happy again, for Merle really had but little comfort in her life and could ill afford to lose that little.

"If my scamp of a May has been playing didoes, she shall get down on her knees and eat humble pie till Merle is satisfied," mused Mrs. Norton, as she buttoned up Roy's "nightie," and folded his little hands on her knees in prayer.

"Now I lay me down to sleep"—

"Now I lay me down to tleep"—

"I pray the Lord my soul to keep"—

"I pray de Lord me toul to teep"—

"If I should die before I wake"—

"If I should die—but I don't want to die and be all toldy, toldy, all frozed in my little trib!" wailed Roy, the gloomy possibilities of his nightly invocation becoming suddenly and painfully defined.

Quite nonplussed by this unexpected and doleful interpretation of a prayer that had been lisped uncomplainingly through her entire nursery, and by

Roy heretofore, Mrs. Norton was, nevertheless, obliged to take his babyship on an immediate ride to Banbury Cross, which, failing to produce desired results, was followed by the recitation of "The Frog Who Would a Wooing Go," the gobbling act being done in her very best style.

Not, however, till the cracker-jar had contributed a diversion to this sad state of affairs, and Pickles had obligingly winded himself in a frolic, was Roy prevailed on "to lay him down" in his little "trib," and forget his possible dissolution.

Mrs. Norton dropped into her chair at last, quite worn out with this unexpected ordeal, and said as she picked up the inevitable darning, "You look tired to-night; does the work drag again, Merle?"

"It drags when my heart is n't in it."

"And have you lost heart again, dear?"

"When things go wrong at school I lose heart in everything. Life is a good deal of a grind anyway; the more you try, the more knocks you get."

"I hate to hear you speak like that. I thought after our last talk you did wonderfully well, and I began to feel quite proud of my girl. But for some days I have n't seen much of her, and lately it has occurred to me that you and May are avoiding each other."

Having opened her trap with a snap, Mrs. Norton

looked up, expecting to see the rat run in, but Merle only twisted uncomfortably in her chair and looked away.

"Would n't it be any comfort to speak and have it all cleared up, Merle?"

"Tattling 's at the root of the whole matter now; you surely don't wish me to add to it?"

"I certainly don't wish you and May to continue going on this way, avoiding each other as if you were leprous. Evidently there is need of a go-between. Can't I fill that office as well as another?"

"It will pass over, I suppose; and by that time several of us will be wiser."

"Who was unwise to start with, Merle?"

"The school authorities, I think. If there had n't been any examination, there would n't have been any trouble."

"I remember May said something about examinations, but I thought she meant study."

"What else did she say?"

"Nothing."

"I wish she had been as close all through, then it would have been easier for me."

"Tell me about it, Merle; now I insist. If you don't, I certainly shall compel May to tell me. It is n't tattling when you explain things for help; it 's when you tell private news maliciously."

"I 've done remarkably well in French so far, considering how I fell behind last year,—all because I loved Miss Silvia, and she took such pains with me. I was getting where I pretty nearly led the class, and when the notice of this last exam. was given out, I just ground to see if I could n't excel. Miss Silvia said the best paper handed in would be honorably mentioned, and I naturally wanted the distinction," said Merle, feeling somehow that if this were "tattling" it was a very relieving process.

"Well, dear, I see no harm so far, except this everlasting striving to beat. I think if none of you knew where the other stood it would save lots of nerves and ill feeling."

"Miss Silvia said that the day before the exam. we could leave our French grammars home, for nothing would be allowed on the desk save a clean blotter and a block of paper."

"Perfectly insulting remark, and if a girl were at all inclined to cheat, I 'm sure it would spur her on!" said Mrs. Norton with a savage thrust of her needle.

"I think you don't know what it is to handle so many girls, Mrs. Norton; for in order to be fair to the honest ones, the cheats have to be watched. Anyway, I put in hard work the night before; and when the printed test was given out next day, I felt pretty sure of myself. But as I read down the

paper I came to a list of irregular verbs that made me gasp. I knew if I failed, they would be my Waterloo. However, I went ahead, leaving them for the last, so as not to get flurried for lack of time. By degrees they came to me till I felt pretty sure of all but one. I looked round the room, and I could tell that many of the girls were puzzled too, and 'misery loves company' you know. Then, as my lagging verb began to come to me and I was scribbling it on my pad to make sure that it looked right, my eyes fell on my neighbor, Miss Edwards,—Oh, how I hate her!—what do you think she was doing?"

"Can't imagine, Merle; things have changed so since I went to school."

"She was copying something from her linen cuff which she had pulled down from under her sleeve!"

"Exactly the fruit I should expect such a system to bear!"

"I've seen girls cheat in lots of different ways, but that was new, and my eyes blazed. Miss Edwards felt cheap, I suppose, and thought I needed to be mollified, and so she wrote something on a paper and passed it over. I opened it—why, I don't know. I simply did,—and there was the very verb that puzzled me conjugated! It verified what I had already written out on my block of paper. I copied

that on the examination paper, signed my name, and passed it up at the desk. That was the end of the affair until a few days after. Then Miss Silvia made out the report, and said it gave her great pleasure to name Miss Elliot's as the best paper, because, she said, it showed what a girl could do by patient and honest effort, and a lot of nice things like that, and I felt translated to the seventh heaven."

"Well, dear, I 'm sure you deserved it."

"I did n't enjoy my high seat very long, though. The congratulations had scarcely died on the girls' lips, before there was a rumor round that Miss Elliot had cheated. I could n't believe my ears! Every one knew it, even May. Of course it came from the note that Miss Edwards had passed, and I had opened. No one saw its contents but us, so I naturally thought that she had told. I offered no explanations. I thought those that did n't know me well enough to trust me could think what they chose."

"I don't blame you much, dear."

"After a few days Miss Silvia assembled the sections and said: 'I am very sorry, young ladies, that from circumstances which I can 't explain it will be necessary to recall the French paper which was given out as best last Friday, and to substitute the next best, which is Miss Edwards'.' "

"Oh Merle, dear, not without questioning you privately, and letting you state your side of the affair?"

"Just so: that 's what I meant when I said 'the harder you try the more knocks you get.' At recess I found that the note, which Miss Edwards had passed to me, and which I had thrown into my desk, was gone! I knew then of course that Miss Silvia had somehow heard that I had had help, and the wretched verb that I scribbled in at the last was in a hurried handwriting, showing that it had been a last thought. The note which was taken out of my desk seemed to verify the whole thing. Of course I had been dishonest and accepted help! Nobody knows what I went through after that, with Miss Edwards being courted and smiled on, and every one whispering and turning to look after me."

"It was very trying to such a sensitive girl as you, I 'm sure, and you have my whole sympathy dear," said Mrs. Norton, wiping her sympathetic tears on Roy's little sock, as Merle hunted aimlessly about for her handkerchief.

"Finally, I just got where I could n't endure it, and I told May. She flared up and was going to blurt out the whole affair, but I made her promise not to complicate matters for me by having it known that I had n't backbone enough not to tattle,—and that 's all the good it did."

"Did she tell?"

"She must; nobody else knew; and it made me no end of trouble. Miss Edwards soon came down from her high perch, and life became a problem, I can tell you. To think that she had originally cheated, passed the verb unasked to me, used my acceptance against me, and had sat still while I was publicly disgraced and she honored, filled the girls' crops just full! After a few days of it she left. Perhaps you think that I was petted and made up to for what I had suffered? Well, I was n't. Girls don't go down on their knees so easily. They hated Miss Edwards for her cheating, but they hated me just as much for tattling. I heard several remarks about a 'chocolate eclair backbone' (it 's an expression some politician used and the girls have taken it up), and I assure you I feel as if my backbone *was* a chocolate eclair, and my legs jujube paste, and my head a sponge,—I have been hounded so long," sighed poor Merle.

"Tell me where May comes in."

"I 've told you. She should have kept her promise and not repeated. That made things all the more bitter. Miss Edwards' parents must have written about the matter, I think; anyway, Miss Silvia said she was ashamed of a class that would make it so uncomfortable that a scholar was obliged to remain

at home, and if any of us wanted to know what boycott meant, we need n't consult a dictionary. Then, what cut most of all," continued Merle, " was Miss Silvia. She called me to her one recess, and said she could n't express how disappointed she was in me. A girl who had held such a high place in the class had a great deal of influence, and could set everything awry by such an occurrence as the present one. Miss Edwards was to return the next day, and she hoped I would recognize her kindly, and let the matter drop. But I could n't recognize her when she had done me such an injustice. *She* was the one to unbend, not I, so last night Miss Silvia returned my album to me, and had written in it this." Merle drew a little book from her pocket, opened to a prettily decorated page, and handed it to her listener. Mrs. Norton read,—

" Is she kind as she is fair?
For beauty lives with kindness.
Love doth to her eyes repair
To help him of his blindness,
And being helped, inhabits there."

Merle hid her head on the chair-back, and gave full vent to a flood of tears. She loved to excel; and if she had earned praise honestly, it was bitter to

suffer disgrace in her classmates' eyes, and to lose the love of the teacher she had worked so faithfully to please.

Mrs. Norton's usually kind eyes flashed with indignation, and she longed to speak her mind to Miss Silvia on examinations in general and this one in particular, and to shake each and every culprit included in the affair.

"I am sorry May complicated matters, though unintentionally," she said at last, "and I can see you were placed where explanation, unless called for, was hard for you to give. Did you confront May with it?"

"I told her she had broken confidence, and had made a nice muddle for me."

"What did she say?"

"She denied it."

"Are you sure you did not judge her harshly?"

"I don't think so."

"And you told no one else?"

"No one in school."

"Any one outside?"

"Only Bob. He walked down with me one morning, just when matters were at the worst. But don't think he told; it takes a girl to do that."

"What did he say?"

"'Rats!'"

"'Rats!' That is what——"

The rattle of May's key in the lock cut short Mrs. Norton's remark and started Merle to her feet; but Mrs. Norton held out a detaining hand saying, "No; sit still! you two shall meet right here, and have one side of this miserable matter cleared up."

May bounded in with a hop and a skip, her face rosy and smiling, and looked very unlike one carrying a burdened conscience. She tossed off her things, and began telling about some merry prank, all unconscious of Merle hidden in the big lounging chair. Suddenly, however, that fact became patent to her, and May's merry manner froze into such stiff dignity, and her freckled nose assumed such an acute angle, that Mrs. Norton smothered a smile behind Roy's apron.

"Merle has just been telling me about this wretched affair, that you have avoided telling. I made up my mind that one of you had got to explain. How came it, May, that you broke confidence?"

"I broke no confidence, mother."

Mrs. Norton looked her steadily in the eyes for a moment, and then turned to Merle.

"My girls never deceive me," she said quietly. "I always expect them to be truthful, and when in the wrong they know they have my help. I never

frighten them into deceit, so Merle, dear, you must be wrong."

"Probably I am," said Merle, heroically taking her first bite of humble pie. "I 've been so muddled and wretched over the affair, I suspect I don't see half straight. If I 've done you an injustice, May, I—I ask your pardon first."

"You *have* done me an injustice, for you never gave me a chance to explain; if you had, I could have told you that Bob had a finger in your pie."

"Bob!"

"Yes, Bob. You told him the whole affair, and he says you did n't caution him not to speak of it."

"Did n't caution him! — but his common-sense ——"

"Common-sense does n't count when a friend's honor is being dragged in the gutter. He did just what I should have done, if you had n't bound me. Blanche strung out the whole affair to him,—*her* version,—and he set her straight, that 's all."

"Oh May! I 'm so sorry! It 's been so hard to lose you too, hardest of all, I think," said Merle, swallowing the rest of her humble pie at one heroic gulp. But the confessor had a generous priestess to appeal to, for May shook off her dignity and was at her goddess's feet in an instant.

"Don't—don't! I was most to blame, after all,

for not explaining on the spot; but my honor, you know, is my one precious point, and it wounded me to think you did n't believe in me."

"But I believe in you more than ever, you precious baggage," said Merle, smoothing back the tumbled hair and wiping the tell-tale eyes with her own moist handkerchief. "But don 't let me off too easily, May. Is there any little penance you 'd like me to pay for my wrong-doing?"

"Yes; don't be hard on Bob, and get all stiff and distant again. It 's made trouble enough already, without tangling up your best friends."

"I agree—anything else? You 'd better strike while the iron 's hot, young lady"

"Nothing else, thanks. It 's enough for me that we 're together again, though our peacemaker deserves some token of our regard."

May turned to her mother, but the chair was empty.

"She 's slipped out, dear soul, that we might have the privacy of our confessions. Let 's find her, and show her her good work," said Merle.

CHAPTER VIII

ALL 'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Bob dutifully confessed his thoughtless disclosure, and humbly begged forgiveness. Merle granted it, tired and sick of these needless misunderstandings with the dearest of her friends. There the matter apparently rested, but to the proud and sensitive girl it was far from settled. She had lost the love and interest of her teacher, the respect of many classmates; and to her sore heart even May and Bob's friendship seemed subtly different.

It was the prevalent feeling that neither Miss Elliot's nor Miss Edwards' paper deserved honorable mention. The latter had cheated through design, while Merle 's paper certainly showed evidence of help on that hastily scrawled verb; and the note found in her desk, which Miss Edwards had showed, clinched it. The pad on which she had scribbled her attempts at its conjugation, and the final correct one before the receipt of the note, had been torn off;

and she now had no proof to clear herself, if she had so chosen. Miss Silvia's quotation in the album stung her pride, and her very evident loss of interest in this scholar reacted. The impulse to let Miss Silvia and her French go to the dogs, and to assume a don't-care air, was certainly strong; but Merle's pride was stronger, and the fear of lowering herself still lower kept her above board, though the sight of Kettell 's green-covered grammar, and the hours that its mastery demanded, were very bitter.

To the matter she never alluded in any way, but its injustice rankled, school became distasteful, and, as she said, losing interest there, which was her little world, she lost interest in everything.

Since her first talk with Mrs. Norton, in which she had awakened to the fact that her own complaints were selfish and self-centred, Merle had put many faithful days on file; days when the little flat was clean and warm, and a cozy supper and a smiling daughter awaited her father's home-coming.

After a number of such days Merle felt an aureole growing round her saintly head, and usually took a little respite, resting on her laurels. The flat might have been a barometer to register its youthful mistress' every mood, so greatly did its indications vary. Yet little by little Merle took pleasure in

right doing—a savage sort of pleasure it may be, for she was not a meek lamb that took kindly to her shearings; and she had many of them, poor dear! before she found their value.

Infinite possibilities of character were locked up in Merle; she was a precious diamond in the rough; but it took many knocks and some hard rubbing to round off rough corners, and bring these possibilities to the light.

There were days when she came home to a cold, untidy sitting-room, and to a dreary, cluttered kitchen; when the fires would n't burn and the lamp smoked, and washing dishes seemed an endless curse; days when both ends would not meet despite her best efforts; days when Della's insistent demands for breakage bills, etc., spoilt her most cherished plans, and taxed all her ingenuity to keep her own self neat and suitable for school; days when she longed for an easy life, for love and care, for fine clothes and social prestige, for a large following of devoted admirers, and all the pretty nothings that make up a young girl's dream and love of admiration.

And then a reproachful look from Mrs. Norton's kindly eyes, and the *un*reproachful look in her father 's tired face, reminding her of the other Father, the Heavenly One, would shake Merle out of

her Slough of Despond into a repentant mood, in which sackcloth and ashes and fervent prayers for which sack-cloth and ashes and fervent prayers for help did in very truth figure largely.

Then the little suite became miraculously clean and cozy, and a charming daughter presided at an inviting little supper, and lent an indulgent ear to her father's socialistic tendencies;—though the dear man often became so absorbed in his Utopian reading that he failed to notice the spandy clean table-cloth, the silver polished for his pleasure, the perfect consistency of his custard, or the generous depth of his frosting.

Literary tendencies had Merle, and, supper over, she dearly loved to shut herself up in the solitude of her blue room and scribble through blank ledgers, and in diaries past their prime. Many a night she pinioned May in her web of woven fancy,—hair-raising myths, that took all the mirth out of May's merry face, and transfixed her blue eyes into an expression more owl-like than ever. Such a blood-curdling power of imagination had Merle that once, seated on the top stair in a whispering gloom, she conjured up a black and horny devil that suddenly leaped from out the statue-shrine in the wall. May leaped too, and made a swift exit from fancy's fright down the banister rail. So magic was Merle's

art, and so real was May 's terror, that it took many months before she could pass the statue-shrine without breaking into a cold sweat, unless in close company, or in the demon-dispelling rays of a lighted lamp.

While the sackcloth-and-ashes mood prevailed Merle forewent her literary tendencies, and lent her company for her father 's pleasure. Then she listened, sewing in hand, to strange socialistic tenets and to weighty editorials of state, looking very wise, very self-sacrificing, and altogether charming. She tried to be patient with his shortcomings, remembering that he was so with hers; to treat his hobbies less harshly; to be interested in the little curios and knicknacks he was fond of buying, though it wasted needed money; and to dust his room without displacing them, or throwing them away. She tried to take pleasure in the thought that he leaned on her, remembering his lonely and disappointed life; and in the meantime was learning herself, through much up-hill climbing and some stumbling, that life was not a question of how much one got out of it, but rather how much one gave to it; was learning that the care of her tired, absorbed father was the duty nearest her hand.

The last few weeks had slipped by with praise-

worthy endeavor and precious little fun—a wretchedly inconsistent way they have of doing,—and Merle was beginning to feel restless and rebellious, and to long for some pleasant turning in her long, dull "lane."

It was Friday, and coming home from school she dropped into a rocker and tossed her bag of books aside. She was glad the week's grind was over, for her honor had not been cleared, and though nothing had been said to her, it seemed to Merle as if an undercurrent of feeling had been stirring of late that made the affair personal again.

She sat rocking listlessly back and forth, her mind filled with unpleasant musings, when the patter of tiny feet sounded on the stair, and in a moment Roy presented his smiling little person for her welcome.

Roy often made pilgrimages to the upper suite, being very fond of his dear "Mer-Mer"—likewise of her syrup jug—which made his journeys very sweet indeed.

Merle lifted him on her lap, but he repulsed her caress, evidently having weightier matters in hand. So, after a deal of wriggling and tugging, he relieved his diminutive pocket of a diminutive letter, which bore no stamp but was addressed, "Miss Merle Elliot." Merle tore open the seal, and read:

"DEAR MERLE:

"I tremble to ask you to come over to-night for fear you will think yourself a last thought.

"Truth is, I heard that the Captain and Mrs. White were liable to return soon, and as I've been planning for some time for a lark while the coast was clear, I decided *tout de suite.*

"Don't play me any tricks in nursing your grievance; 'be generous,' as I once heard a certain siren advise.

"Would you mind wearing your white dress, with pink in your hair? Don't be frightened, I'm all right—only notional.

"I always feel that I have the privilege to supply my neighbors with flowers, and I'll call for you—it may be late—being the host, but let May come first, and you wait for me. I have a reason for asking it, which I'll explain later.

"Yours at his wit's end,

"BOB."

"Well, that's what I call cool, babykins!" commented Merle. "A party, and only a few hours to prepare. But, we'll go,—oh yes, good times are n't so plentiful that we can afford to miss them in order to nurse grievances; and we'll be so gracious, so charming, that the next time perhaps we won't be a 'last thought.'

"Now that I think of it, I believe May knew of this affair. She's been terribly absorbed in something the last few days, and when I went into her room unexpectedly she jumped, and said something about airing her blue mull which was spread on the bed.

"Oh, well, May makes warmer friends than I do, and goes more, and entertains in return. Bob has never stepped his foot inside my rooms; he owes me nothing, so why should I be the first thought?"

May came speeding up the stairs to interrupt this bitter musing, and burst into the room waving a small envelope, the duplicate of Merle's.

"Have you received yours?"

"Yes, just now,—sweet time to inform one! When did you get yours?"

"What shall you wear?" exclaimed May, looking very guilty about the eyes, and very weak about the mouth; "that is, you'll wear your mull, of course."

"That or my night-dress. Bob says, 'Would you mind wearing white, with pink in your hair?'"

"Heavens! what a perfectly imbecile request—from a Harvard man too!"

"Don't play 'possum dear, you're too transparent for such skilful work Tell me how came your neighbor to remember me at all? to please you?"

"To please me! *My* neighbor! Have you any

salts handy? I feel faint! Ta-ta, you suspicious wretch; ask for expalnations at headquarters. In the meantime set your fears at rest, and cultivate your best expression."

Left to herself, Merle did cultivate her "best expression," for her heart was young, and it took little to quicken its beating. Her pang of jealousy soon died in the prospect of a pleasant evening, and her household duties suddenly became quite glorified as she sang and skipped about, preparing supper and clearing it away.

It is a surprising fact that a bath, the brushing of hair, and the donning of a simple mull dress should require some hours for their completion, but as a humble historian I am constrained to admit facts. It was dark and the gas lighted before our heroine had succeeded in coiling the pretty waves of silky brown hair in place, amidst which the stipulated pink bow sat jauntily; and nearly eight by the church clock when the white mull was satisfactorily donned, and its pink girdle clasped round a healthy little waist.

Merle was bent on shining that night, if only to surprise her hard-hearted and thoughtless neighbor; and she consulted her mirror long and intimately, and smiled derisively at its very evident answer. Not quite satisfied with results, however, she skilfully

blackened her eyebrows with a charred match, and chalked her cheeks. She looked very stagey and altogether magnificent from a distance, but after wriggling into her long closet for her waterproof cape, and getting warm and excited by reason of Bob's delay, she was appalled to find a black smooch across her Juno forehead, and a mottled, smallpoxy marking on her chalky, perspiring cheeks. She fled for water, emerged fresh and rosy, and was sensible enough to leave well-enough alone.

May had gone to the party long ago, having muttered some excuse, which was swallowed up in the slam of the front door. Restless and indignant that Bob should see fit to keep her waiting at his pleasure, Merle descended to Mrs. Norton to get sympathy for her grievance and a good look in her cheval mirror.

What was her amazement to find the rooms not only dark, but deserted, save for Roy asleep in his crib!

This phenomenal state of affairs portended something—what? Merle cudgelled her brains to answer that query, when a swift step sounded on the porch, and the bell tinkled with a vigorous pull.

Remembering her resolve to be gracious at all costs, thereby heaping coals of fire upon her host's

ungracious head, Merle opened the door, and stood smiling the most melting of smiles.

"If you were n't an angel, you 'd shut the door in my face; but it could n't be helped, and I 'll explain later," said Bob, breathless with haste. "You can't go up-stairs over there to take off your wraps —it 's so deuced late,—will you pin on these flowers here?"

Merle lifted the bunch of pink roses nervously from the box, thanked the giver, and said as she fastened them carelessly into her belt, "You should have let me run over with May and not bothered. I 'm used to waiting on myself, and those college girls of yours are not, you know."

Bob opened his mouth to speak, but wisely closed it and hurried his guest through the yards and up his piazza.

"Can't you throw off your wrap here in the vestibule?" he whispered, "It 's so late!"

Merle shook off her cape, ignoring help, saying to herself as her throat tightened, "He 's ashamed of my poor things and wants to keep them out of sight. This night over, I 'll act what I said to May, and keep away from people who are socially so far above me."

Down the hall Merle walked quickly, hurt and in-

dignant, stepped one foot over the parlor threshold —and stood rooted to the spot.

The two parlors had been thrown into one, and the walls were lined with her classmates,—rows on rows of young girls all in white, each carrying a pink rose, representative of the class color. Far in one corner May's frousled head loomed up from behind a bust of Bach, where the emotional one had ensconced herself in case the scene should prove too affecting. Near her stood Mrs. Norton in her rich black lace, and her kind eyes rested on the figure at the threshold with proud satisfaction.

Miss Silvia was leaning against a little table, looking pale and somewhat tremulous. She had prepared an appropriate speech, illustrative of the most subtle points of rhetoric and grammar, and had it all learned by heart, but as her eyes met those of the tall girl in the doorway, her own filled, she forgot her fine words, forgot everything except the injustice she had done her, and stepping swiftly across the room, folded the girl in her arms.

There were several audible sniffs, Mrs. Norton openly bedewed her Duchess lace, while May gave a convulsive gulp in an effort to swallow her emotion, and even Bob muttered something about its being close and pulled down a window.

"Girls," said Miss Silvia, "I publicly disgraced

this dear girl in recalling her honorable mention, for her paper was excellent from first to last. Circumstances were against her, I admit, but her innocence has been proved now by the receipt, from a friend, of the paper she used that day, on which her verb is correctly conjugated after many trials. Miss Edwards has further confessed that her note was not solicited.

"We all take pleasure, dear, in asking your pardon for making your life so hard,—I most of all; and I love and honor more dearly than words can express a girl who has the character to walk cleanly through such an expeirence without attempts to clear herself when it would pull another down; a girl who has never resented my disappointment in her by a moment's shirking of her studies, but to-day leads her class. Girls, if you want a safe model, here she stands!"

Merle's glance swept round the room; many pairs of eyes met hers kindly; then it blotted—this sea of faces—and her own eyes filled with tears.

Terrified lest Merle should be overcome, May suddenly raised her rose on high and shouted,—"Girls! What 's the matter with Merle Elliot?"

Then came the deafening response from many earnest voices—"She 's *all* RIGHT!!" and with the retort came a rain of roses, filling her outstretched

arms, hanging pendant in her dress, and strewing the floor about her.

Very pretty she looked in her fragrant framing, with a soft light in her proud eyes that became her best,—very pretty indeed, as she said in a low voice that would get choky now and then,—

"I can't thank you as I want to, girls, all, each one—and the dear friend who helped me out of my tangle; but—I can borrow from Shakespeare—Miss Silvia always encourages us in that" (with a smile)—"and say, 'All's well that ends well!'"

The speech was greeted with three deafening cheers, a general shaking of hands, and the breaking of ranks.

Then Bob came out strong, and earned an enviable name as host, providing no end of fun, and winding up with a collation in the mahogany dining-room that made Merle's head swim with pride and satisfaction.

Wonderfully easy of fulfilment Merle found her resolve to be "gracious and charming," for the prevailing air of admiration, together with the luxuriousness of Bob's catering, made an atmosphere very easy to her breathing. Quite like a queen she felt as she moved through the stately rooms surrounded by her admiring cortège—a queen, wise to make the

most of this hour's crowning, though the morrow should waken her to a work-a-day world.

I venture to say that the discreet butler never came so near losing his discretion as he did that night when the rooms rang with jolly shouts, and all sorts of odd perpetrations were practised.

Mrs. Norton left early to guard her crib, and May held high carnival, indulging in lobster salad, welsh rarebit, and variegated ices, as a relief to the emotional tension she had endured earlier in the evening.

Merle bowed out the last guest and skipped back to the parlor to bunch her roses, and to think. She had food for thought. Who had found the paper that exonerated her? Where had it come from? She and Bob had not once met during the evening, except when he had taken her into the dining-room as his guest of honor. His duties as host excused this, but now that it was all over, it occurred to Merle that he had avoided her. A suspicion of the truth told her why, and she ransacked her mind for proof.

She heard the butler close and lock the front door; evidently he thought his labors over. May had gone, but she had lingered to say good-by to all, and to await her escort.

She heard Bob giving low-toned directions to the servants, then his firm step came briskly down the

hall. In a twinkling he stood in the doorway, and his eyes went from Merle to her labyrinth of roses.

"'The flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la,
Have nothing to do with the case!'"

sang Merle.

"'I 've got to take under my wing, tra-la,
A most attractive young thing, tra-la,
With a love'

with a love of a face," improvised Bob in answer as he waltzed up to his partner, and offered his arm with a profound bow.

"No; I 've had larks enough for one night," said Merle, suddenly growing serious.

"A penny for your thoughts ma'am."

"Who was the knight that slew my dragon, Bob?"

"Why button-hole me?"

"Don 't dodge! I let you off easily once; you 've got to stand muster now."

"I helped you into it—the trouble—it was no more than fair——"

"But I forgave you that."

"Not really—you tried to—but you don't fool me, you know. I did n't much blame you either, but I set to work to see what reparation I could make to win back your good graces. Nothing came till I was about to give up the matter as a bad job. Then the other day, as I was rummaging through some

papers, I came across this. It was the paper you tore off your pad for me when I wanted to write an address,—that morning I walked down with you to school and you told me about the affair."

"I remember now, and I told you it was scribbled over, but you said you 'd use the back."

"I knew I could n't make matters worse, so I wrote the whole affair to Miss Silvia and enclosed the paper."

"Bob!"

"Hold on! She came flying out here, and I never saw any one so excited. So all in a jiffy we planned the whole affair, and it was no fool of a job to keep you in the dark—but was n't it a rouser?"

"A perfect rouser from first to last, Bob; and oh! I feel so proud; but Miss Silvia owed me something—you did n't,—and now ——"

"Now you are hopelessly in debt, lady."

"Mrs. Norton says we should repay our social debts," said Merle laughing, "but if it 's hopeless——"

"Don't try till I send in my bill."

"Still, debts gather interest, and I 'd rather pay mine as I go along," said Merle wickedly.

"The more interest, the better—in this case."

"What if it should get outlawed!"

"Thanks for the caution. I 'll have to look out

for that and not delay too long; and in the meantime would you mind preparing for it?"

Merle paused in the bunching of her roses, and said as she held out a particularly long and beautiful one,—"What a pity they have to have thorns to——"

The remark was certainly harmless, and doubtless would have reached its finish if Merle had kept her eyes on the rose, but chancing to look up, she faltered, blushed, and murmured something about its being warm—and late.

Bob laughed, admitted that it might be warm beside an open grate, and then obediently went into the hall for her wrap.

The butler unlocked the door, and profoundly bowed the pair out. The piazza was dark, the steps treacherous, and Merle burdened with flowers. What more natural than that she should need a guiding hand? She had it anyway, two strong ones, and even after the safety of the walk was reached, Bob suddenly drew her hand within his arm, and said as he held it, which was necessary for emphasis of course:

"All 's well that ends well, as you said, Merle, but remember that just now you 're deep in debt!"

CHAPTER IX

MAY SHUNS SCYLLA AND FALLS INTO CHARYBDIS

May paused in the onslaught she was making on a ruddy apple, removed her feet from the chair upon which they were airily perched, tucked her book under the chair's cushion (a book she was guarding from too particular eyes), and said, as she seated herself on a hassock at her mother 's knee,—

"Are you going to make me your confidante, dearie? or is the black sheep going to get a shearing?"

"Both,—the first not because she deserves it, but because I find it necessary; the last ——"

"Don 't trouble to go into particulars, it 's the same old story. When I 'm sick it 's because I 've had too much fun; when I 'm lame, it 's always skating, never sweeping—' housework 's healthy ' ; when I 've a cold, it 's going out between the dances, never washing dishes in a cold basement; when I 'm blue, it 's my nerves worn out with gallivanting, never because I 'm pining for a little fun. I 'm like popcorn

that needs an occasional shaking up, else I 'd burn—with idleness! Well, here 's for the shaking."

"You can't be serious even when I ask you. Have you your lessons for to-day?"

"I never study till night."

"Have you practised?"

"I shall do double practice to-morrow."

"And the dishes downstairs, and a few little tasks I asked you to help me out with?"

"I 'll go now ——"

"Sit still. What was that book you were reading?"

"It 's—all the girls are reading it, mother—you have to have experience with the bad as well as the good, so that you can choose."

"I don't believe in the theory of swilling wine all your life in hopes to escape drunkenness in old age. I don't leave arsenic round for Roy to taste, that his system may get inoculated. I keep poison, both physical and moral, out of my children's way—so long as they will let me."

"I 'll not read any more if you say so—it has n't hurt me so far, mother."

"I hope not, but you 're no judge of that. My mother used to say,—'Never allow a vulgar story to be repeated in your hearing. What right has any one to *poison* your mind? You may be above

enjoying it, but once heard it 's there to rankle, to suggest,—a dirty, needless, cankerous deposit.' "

"My set are above repeating vulgar stories," said May with an injured air.

"But evidently they 're not above reading vulgar books. A book that you feel like hiding from me is not fit for you to touch. Put it in the grate."

"It 's a library book!"

"So much the better; it will save some innocent mind from its poisoning perhaps and you can pay for it out of your allowance. If I ever find you again with a book you can't leave openly about, May, I shall forbid your having a library card. It 's my candid opinion, anyway, you 'd spend more time on your lessons without it."

"I thought reading was educational."

"It is n't educating you very fast, according to your last report. Do you know what I have written after my signature, where remarks are requested?"

"What, mother?"

"'This is a shameful report. The teachers who labor so faithfully for such disappointing results, have all my sympathy.' "

"Oh, mother! I 'm too old for such reproof as that."

"Too old for such a report, rather, May. I can't

imagine what your dear father would have felt. Did you do your mending to-day before you took your bath?"

"I forgot it till I was undressed."

"So you put on your stockings full of holes, and your underclothing buttonless?"

"I intend to fix them all to-night."

"You are laying up a great many things for one who expects to go out."

"Oh, I forgot the social."

"I won't go through any more lists, May; you see for yourself how matters stand; and I took such comfort in thinking of your promise to fill Grace's place!"

"I did intend to, and I have tried."

"Your intentions are good, May, but impulsive like the rest of you; they lack steadfastness. I have done your work day after day while you went skating; I have had absolutely no help with Roy except from Merle; I have watched you neglect your studies and your music; and I have done all your sewing, unless it went undone as to-day. I wanted to see how far you would go if I said nothing. Do you think I 'm fair in what I say?"

"I *am* a black sheep, mother."

"I never like to sadden my girls with family matters which they cannot help, and I keep many worries

to myself, May, just so long as I think it best. But there comes a time when I feel that confidence must be given and the burdens shared. You are nearly seventeen, and plenty old enough to take some responsibility and thought—it must be my fault that you don't."

Mrs. Norton stroked the idle little hand that rested on her knee, and seemed reluctant, after all, to make her disclosure.

"I have been hiring Bridget extra of late to help me out; I'm not nearly so strong as I used to be. Papa's long illness, and the worry about Grace, and Roy coming so late, have taken a good deal out of me. But the store is n't doing quite so well, economy is imperatively necessary, and I wondered whether you 'd rather help with the work, or drop your music."

"The store?"

"Yes, we can 't expect a hired man to do what papa did. He bent every energy to its success, and really killed himself working to leave us safe and comfortable."

"It seems so nice to talk cozy and intimate like this," said May straightening her broad shoulders. "I feel responsible already, and I 'll help you and keep the music, because I think that will please you best. If I had n't spent my allowance, I 'd pay for

part, but I 'll make up for that in effort. Will that do? "

" For the present, yes," admitted Mrs. Norton, feeling that somehow May had failed to take the matter as seriously as she had intended her to do. " Go quietly about your tasks, do each day's share, and don't expect either praise or blame from me. I shall watch you, but say nothing, for I don't mean to treat you like a child much longer, dear. Don't expect me to be constantly saying, ' Do this,' and ' Do that,' when you know as well as I do that the thing must be done and it 's your duty to do it. Try to feel responsible, and anxious to share the burdens as well as the pleasures of home; then some day you 'll be ready for one of your own."

" Don't want any, ma'am. Much prefer single blessedness. You can marry off Grace and Merle, but please don't plan for me."

" I 'm not planning for any one, and certainly not for you, you weathercock! "

" Still, there 's Bob. I heard you praising him, hoping he 'd get the choice of his heart," said May, striking a sentimental attitude with her hand spread dramatically over that susceptible organ,—" and here only the other day you said Merle was getting to be a model housekeeper, and would make somebody

happy! Putting two and two together, what do we have?"

"A lot of nonsense, you silly girl. Merle is n't out of school, and Bob not half through college."

"Stranger things have happened!"

"And Merle has sense enough, I know, to fit herself for something useful before she ties herself up."

"I 'm astonished at the disrespectful manner in which you speak of the holy matrimonial state!"

"I 'm speaking of it in reference to fledglings, that have n't shed their pin-feathers."

"I thought I had reached woman's estate what with the burdens you have imposed on my shoulders!" laughed May, as her mother winced a little at her cornering retort. "But I 'll let you off, you inconsistent monitor, if you 'll only tell me whether it has ever occurred to you that your next-door neighbor is solicitous for the welfare of your upstairs tenant?"

"Why, Merle is very pretty, of course," admitted Mrs. Norton.

"Of course!"

"And doubtless he does n't snub her——"

"Doubtless he does n't!"

"But as for anything more, I certainly have n't seen it."

"Which speaks very poorly for your new glasses, mother."

"And I 'm sure she never——"

"No more she does, which is a very bad sign from her. But she dotes on music, thinks 'White' a lovely name, so pure and all that, and has worn pink in her hair for a month!"

"I did n't know you could be so sentimental, May!

"I know all the symptoms, though I steer clear of the disease."

"Don't keep me here talking nonsense any longer. Just take your meddlesome finger out of your neighbor's pie, and devote this wasted energy to some purpose."

"I will mother, I will."

May did devote her wasted energy to some purpose, for a while. Days flew by when the sink was innocent of dishes, when glasses were shined, knives polished, the stove blackened, and the hearth swept. Mrs. Norton held her breath—would have choked holding it if she had not been a mother wise enough from experience to know that this seraphic state of affairs would blow over into one less winged.

Blow over it did, this particular stage, and May next devoted her energies to her sewing. Right through her wardrobe from A to Z she passed, and a

very long alphabet it was. Buttons, tapes, and loose edgings were reinforced, rents repaired, holes patched, stockings darned,—magic darning was May's, with a corn or a bunion promised for each toe. Her energies outlasting the stock in hand, May even turned to Roy's aprons; and once, only once, she was found hemming a dish towel, tied into an arm-chair for the better expansion of her lungs, with such an expression of dove-like meekness that even a saint would have been provoked to laughter.

Next in order came practising, and such hours of stormy work as May put in, clearing the house of rats and sadly disturbing the peace of the neighborhood. Mrs. Norton felt as if delirium tremens or something similar were coming on, and Grandmother after her weekly visit was threatened with a nervous fever.

Baby-tending came next, and Roy led a charmed life, wondering what magic had transformed his somewhat irritable May into the most ardent of baby worshippers. While this lasted Mrs. Norton went shopping in her best black walking costume, and made up a long arrears of calls.

This over, May turned to her books, and in truth burned the midnight oil. She scorched her bangs under the student 's lamp, strained her eyes struggling with fine print, and began to blink and squint

and go into such facial contortions that Mrs. Norton consulted the family medical book for the early symptoms of St. Vitus' dance. During this Socratic wrestling, May grew pale and round-shouldered, eschewed pickled limes, read *Pilgrim's Progress*, and was never once found with her feet higher than the hassock. Then, fortunately, two or three dances streaked the horizon and saved May from an early grave, for being once waked up she leaned back on her oars and drifted—back into her jolly old self.

Mrs. Norton did the dishes and neglected work without reproof, or when too weary installed Bridget. She tried to do her sewing and May's also, which soon fell behind. She had the constant care of Roy, together with the grief of seeing the music and studies neglected as before.

"I envy mothers who can discipline their girls by heart-to-heart talks," mused Mrs. Norton as she sat hemming interminable lengths of sheeting, while May munched pop-corn, and sat reading with her feet comfortably toasting on the fender. "With Grace I could, but May is different; and to veneer facts, I 'm fast coming to the conclusion, does not pay with her."

"You can't have any—don't touch me! Go away!" snapped May, as Roy leaned a very loving little person against her chair and sniffed for corn.

Now Roy had a little of May's blood in his own small veins, and it took far more diplomacy than his two years had taught him to meet her successfully in her various moods. Furthermore he had not fully recovered from the halcyon days just passed, and he suffered from neglect, for Mrs. Norton had been too busy for several days to give him his airing, and the close confinement was upsetting his little nerves.

Roy resented this uncalled for repulse, and biding his time made a wild dash, intending to retreat with the pan of corn. He missed his aim, however, and finding himself burdened with a useless book, immediately threw it into the open grate. May made an equally wild dash for the tongs, having no notion of absorbing another month 's allowance in library losses, upsetting her corn and scorching her fingers in its rescue.

Repaying Roy with a smart box on the ear, May hitched her chair to the other side of the room, leaving her tormentor to revel in the scattered corn if he so chose. Roy received his blessing silently and fell to work.

Soon the pan was refilled with corn, salt, and unavoidable lint, together with a generous scooping with both little hands of the grate 's fallen ashes. In a twinkling Roy was on his feet, and the pan on May's head.

"You hateful child!" screamed May snatching off the sooty covering, and making a dash after the swiftly retreating Roy. "I'll shake the very breath out of you!"

Down the hall, through the parlor, the pair swept, the little tan shoes doing bravely, but in the turning by the what-not Roy faltered, and May had him in her clutches in a wink. She might have shaken the breath out of him if Mrs. Norton had not hastened to his rescue, for May had a high temper when fully roused, and was sometimes very thoughtless.

As it was Roy had no breath left to cry, but clung to his mother's skirts, while May caught up her book, swept out of the room, and locked herself up in high dudgeon.

Whether she fell asleep, or was oblivious to time in the throes of her reading I can't say, but it was dark and long after tea time before she emerged from her seclusion, and stood blinking and yawning in the doorway.

"Goodness, I'm as hungry as a bear! What's good for supper, mother?"

"I can't stop to get supper; you'll have to wait on yourself to-night. This sewing is behind, and I've lost a couple of hours with Roy."

May glanced at the crib, surprised to find its occupant asleep at this early hour, his pretty little

face pale and tear-stained. Several handkerchiefs covered with blood lay about, and a wet sheet was drying over the register.

"Has Roy had the nosebleed?"

"A very serious one. I suppose I ought not to let him sleep, but——"

May felt the atmosphere's low register, and the guilty knowledge of her contribution to its lowering made her anxious to make amends.

"I 'll run down and get supper, and when I ring you wake Roy and come."

"Pray don 't bother me; just wait on yourself. Roy is too sick to disturb, and these sheets are promised."

"Promised!" gasped May.

"I 'm doing them for Miss Norcross' marriage."

"As a gift, mother?"

"No; they 'll pay me."

"Pay you!" stammered May, turning as pale as the sleeping Roy.

"I told you some time ago that the store was n't doing so well. I can do this better than heavier work, and it will pay Bridget."

"Oh, mother! *mother!*" cried May, clasping her, sheet and all, in her arms, "oh mother, dear, what a wicked, good-for-nothing wretch I am!"

"Never mind lamenting, May; I told you enough

to guide you if you had so chosen. Just leave me alone to finish this, for the lamp is n't filled, and I want to make the most of it while it lasts."

Mrs. Norton pushed her gently aside, and took up her work; while May, repulsed for the first time in her life, got down-stairs someway, and, locking herself into the pantry, bedewed the pickle and preserve jars with some very honest and repentant tears. How she ever saw to toast the bread, or brewed the tea with anything but tears, she never knew, but she prepared her tray in the daintiest manner, hoping to break down her mother 's reserve and to be comforted and forgiven in her loving arms. But Mrs. Norton was too busy to eat, and the toast cooled untasted till Pickles gobbled it up on the sly, and upset the tea into the bargain.

Roy woke and had another attack of nosebleed; and as all offers of help were coldly repulsed, May reached for her nightdress, and betook herself off with no good-night kiss.

Perhaps she lay awake thinking; at least she woke late the next morning, and was surprised to find how late, for the house was quiet and no one moving save Merle overhead.

It certainly was an unusual state of affairs that kept her mother in bed, but Mrs. Norton complained of feeling used up. She was sorry to leave things to

May, but thought it wise to rest. She had a severe cold and felt altogether queer.

"Dress Roy and keep him from pattering round these cold rooms barefooted, else you 'll have two sick," commanded Mrs. Norton in a dolorous tone.

But Roy would have nothing to do with his late antagonist, and led May a merry chase in her patient efforts to beguile him.

"Leave him alone then, and see to things downstairs."

"I 'll have time to get you something to eat and call for Bridget on my way to school," said May, swallowing a sob as she put a stocking on wrong-side-out and snapped her elastic.

"We can't afford Bridget; you 'll have to see to things yourself."

"And stay home from school?" May wished the words back the moment they had left her lips, but avoiding her mother's reproachful glance, threw on her wrapper, and made all possible haste for the basement.

Although late, it seemed early, as the day was so dark; and May groped about the dingy, cold kitchen, wondering where all the sunshine of the little home had gone.

The stove was a black mystery, its dampers hydra-headed enigmas; but after much wrestling a fire

was started, and May turned her attention to the toast and coffee. Toast had seemed easy only the night before with a nicely banked fire, but with a sputtering, smoky new one, May learned there was art even in this homely fare. She set the burnt, soggy slices in the oven, stirred up the coffee with its egg, and wondered, after adding the boiling water, why the egg flew to the top in a miserable stringy mass, instead of settling nicely to the bottom as it should do.

"I 'll poach an egg; it 's nutritious and as easy as pie. I 've seen mother do it hundreds of times," said May, smiling at Roy who had descended to bury the hatchet, the ticklings of his hungry little nose not to be withstood.

"You fill the pan full of boiling water and drop the egg into the muffin ring so—now you 'll see it all settle nicely and—" but the egg did n't settle nicely, it flew over the entire pan in a murky veil, frothed up at the sides, and finally settled into a stringy mass that looked much like lemon-colored macaroni. May wiped a tear on the dish towel, drained off the boiling water, and threw the pan with its gluing of egg into the cellar, where Pickles scorched his cold nose in trying to determine its contents.

Covering up the smoky toast with a liberal supply

of butter, May dug the frozen cream from the top of the milk bottle, jabbing her fingers with the fork, and added her flaky icicle to the already cooling coffee.

"It does n't look as good as I meant it should—the fire is tricky," said the hot and perspiring cook, as she offered her unsavory breakfast in an unaired room to an unwashed invalid.

"Anything will taste good to me, dear," said the relenting mother as she glanced at the flushed and worried little face.

"What will you have for dinner?" queried the head cook, brightening at the relenting voice and endearing word.

"Anything will do. Get the house warm and tidy up; the furnace drafts are the same as the stove; you study physics, so you know the theory. Of course, with an ignorant servant, I should have to go into particulars, with you it 's different."

"Bad air is stagnant and hard to heat!" said the scholar in physics, as she threw open doors and windows to a howling gale, which sent papers scattering, the bird cage swinging on its hook, and the invalid under the bed clothes.

Later in the day May found reason to lament that her mother's instructions on the furnace drafts had left so much to her intelligence. Such a be-

wilderment of slides, knobs, and holes, that however you manipulated did exactly the reverse of the expected! May recalled her physics, tried to remember which way the arrows pointed in the diagram of an air-shaft, and made a chalky duplicate on the cellar wall for assistance. In vain. The first half of the day the house was frigid, the second half torrid, and the invalid was forced to leave her bed or submit to certain asphyxiation.

The lunch was a marvel, the supper a duplicate, and after a stormy wrestle in undressing Roy, May retired, weary in body and soul, feeling that the throes of school and practising had a roseate hue in their perspective never before observed.

The second day the invalid was on the mend, but still obliged to keep in bed. As for May, matters were even worse. She felt disgraced in not accomplishing what she had failed in the day before; and besides the pantry's previous supply had dwindled, and the cook herself was hungry. She was sadly disillusioned as to her housewifely accomplishments, finding responsibility far different from a few light duties. What would happen if her mother were seriously ill, and she forced to the helm, was not especially pleasant food for thought just then. Merle suddenly sprouted wings as May reviewed all that her goddess could do and do well; and she felt

herself shrivelling up into a speck too insignificant to dust. Home was no longer home, and something of what her mother's willing hands had accomplished was appreciated for the first time.

Before the week was over the invalid was up, and May was receiving a few practical lessons that outlasted her smattering of French and jumble of historical facts. Meriting her mother's confidence, she got it at last, and the two had a long talk that May never forgot.

"We 'll pull in the same boat, mother dear, and I 'll paddle fair," said the recreant, as financial matters were explained and facts laid bare. "I 'll give up half my allowance; fewer pickled limes will improve my health; and I want to stop my music this quarter, and do justice to what I 've slighted; and then—you won't do any more sewing for pay—promise, mother."

"Never, while I have a generous and thoughtful daughter. It rests with you, May."

"Then that shall be my anchor—I need something to keep me serious."

"But be happily serious, dear. I want my merry May, the life of the house, for I could n't get along without her."

May's resolve bore good fruit, for her resolve was at last deep and honest. She had had an

unforgetable experience with impulsive spurts, and had learned to steer clear of her Charybdis. The recollection of her few days of responsibility opened her eyes wonderfully, and the fear that her mother would do work for pay kept her resolution fresh.

No saint was May, only a flesh-and-blood girl struggling like you and me to do right. Yet she must have succeeded in spite of some failures, for, as she sat apart one night undressing Roy, and taking pleasure in the thought that her tired mother was reading, Mrs. Norton watched the pretty picture from behind the book, marvelling at May's gentle tone and patient tact that kept Roy docile and smiling, and thought, as she glanced with misty eyes at the dear face that ever smiled from its framing: "Father was right. I shall live yet to say that May is my comfort."

CHAPTER

A SYMPHONY RUSH SEAT

"Mer—le!"

"Yes, Mrs. Norton."

"Are you home?"

"Very much so, thank you."

"I just took a Johnny-cake out of the oven, don't you want to come down and help May while it's hot?"

Mrs. Norton had a happy knack of turning out toothsome edibles just in the nick of time for May home from school; and Merle seldom failed to assist in their disposition. I doubt if anything often came from that oven that some one outside the family did not enjoy, for Mrs. Norton's hospitality was unceasing.

She had a gracious way of extending her treats that left one with no chance to think of indebtedness; as for her tea-pot, it should have been enshrined in some historical society. I forget how many generations it had served, but it was worthy its present mistress; a big, bulging, shiny affair, with a cap that

played tricks and a spout that chirped like a cricket. Measured by cups its capacity would doubtless have yielded a definite quantity, but given good cheer as a unit the quotient seemed limitless. It served all alike, from the wealthy friend who sipped it out of a Dresden cup, wondering wherein the charm of its brewing lay, to the tired, dusty ashman, who did n't mind wetting his whistle, ma 'am.

Right through the ranks its good cheer passed, from the pickle-man who peddled his wares every Saturday, the little seamstress who brought a cold lunch, the Jew peddler with the pack of mats, down to the very tramp that disgraced the county and marked her gate-post for the next hanger-on. Dear generous soul! of her the poet must surely have thought when he wrote:

"She doeth little kindnesses,
Which most leave undone or despise;
For naught that sets one heart at ease,
And giveth happiness or peace,
Is low-esteeméd in her eyes."

Merle took the lightning express (banister rail) for the basement, and sat in the broad seat of the sunny bay with her favorite corner of crusty corn-cake, spread liberally with golden butter.

Opposite sat May gorging, too engrossed for speech, until a familiar tread was heard in the

kitchen, and in answer to Merle's questioning ear, she vouchsafed this answer, "Jones!"

May hitched her chair round in readiness to snub the intruder—flight being too late; cut a new square for Merle, another for herself, spread it carefully, and then suddenly laid it on a plate, with which she abruptly left the room.

"Eat this with your tea, Mrs. Jones; it 's hot, and mother had uncommonly good luck."

"Oh, thanks, awfully."

"Don't mention it."

May was back in a wink, slamming the door behind her, and dropped into her seat, looking a trifle red, and decidedly embarrassed.

"Shake! I 'm proud of you, my dear!" said Merle, offering her free hand.

"Don't praise me! I hate her fawning ways as much as ever; and I could throw the tea-pot at her this very minute; but there 's no need of my making myself a bear. Mother says I only hurt myself, and I guess she 's right, for I 've tormented Mrs. Jones ever since I can remember, and I don't see any improvement."

"It 's dreadfully hard to be charitable," sighed Merle. "There 's Bridget; I 've done and done for her in little ways, and even now she never misses a chance to steal from me."

"Mother says that is n't the way to look at it. It 's what one does, not the pay one gets, that counts. That Bridget steals is to be regretted, but it does n't lessen the value of your kindness," propounded May in a ministerial tone. "That 's what they call laying up treasures in heaven, I suppose, but it 's a pity there 's so much moth and rust to wade through down here. Another piece?"

"No; thanks. I 've been thinking, May," continued Merle, embracing her knees thoughtfully, "I 've been thinking ——"

"Of some lark, I hope,—gracious! was that one of the boys flew by on horseback?"

"I 'm not looking at either boys or horses—listen. We really ought to go to a Symphony, May. 'Green' is no name for the condition we 're in when it comes to any music that 's really the thing. All the girls that amount to anything go, and it 's simply maddening to hear them rave over the musicians and the conductor's waxy hands, and the glib way they rattle off those composers' names, 'Vagner' and 'Chopang' and all that. We must go, if only to say so. Suppose I get tickets for Friday?"

"I 'm not particular about being in the swim, and if it 's music, I 'm more than sure of being bored. How much does it cost?"

"The rush seats are only a quarter, but these are the kind the real music lovers buy, and it 's no disgrace at all to sit in the gallery. Miss Prince has, so we 're safe. Melba sings this week, and you can't tell how thankful you may be, in company, to say you 've heard her. Such things make conversation—and society."

"Friday, did you say?"

"Yes, 2.30. We could have our books all ready to rush out of school at the first sound of the gong, and we can easily get to Winter Street in the half-hour."

"I don't feel overjoyed at the prospect; it surely does n't sound inviting, but if you think it 's proper, perhaps we may as well go."

"No doubt about the propriety, May. Wear your best, and rely on me. Look up some of the prominent composers' names for the pronunciation, because you may want to air your knowledge while it 's fresh—the programme for the day for instance."

By a stroke of luck Merle secured her tickets, and with feverish impatience awaited the day. Wednesday it snowed, Thursday it rained, and by Friday the streets were swimming in slush, with a threatening sky overhead.

May refused point-blank to wear her best, and so

flustered Merle that they were half-way to school before she discovered that she had forgotten the tickets.

A little rift of sun suddenly peeped out from the clouds, thawing May, who agreed to turn back and to dress herself in keeping with so august an occasion.

But the sun had only played a trick, and hid his head—laughing doubtless—for the rest of the day, causing May's ill-humor to suffer a relapse.

By the time school was dismissed it was snowing lightly, just enough to give the lie to the safety of walking, and to dampen one's ardor, to say nothing of one's best plumage. May got stranded in a bank of icy slush, and had to stand stork-fashion on one leg, while Merle gingerly extricated her rubber. She had scarcely regained her normal position before a gust of wind relieved her of her cherished best hat, and sent her and a couple of obliging males skimming down the street in literally a winged chase. In the meantime of course the car came, and in making a cross-cut May's dress was splashed by a too near passing cart. The car was crowded, and her forced entrance left her by the cold door, under which the icy air swept at pleasure and nearly froze her feet. In spite of her height she burst her sleeve hanging on the straps, and in "moving up" tripped over an

old man's cane, and came precious near measuring her length in the car straw. This literally proved the last straw on the camel's back, for by the time Music Hall was reached, the end of May's patience was reached too.

She looked like a blighted being, and felt like one as she glanced down at her spotted dress, and up at the equally spotted hat, and she wedged herself irritably into the long line that stood in waiting.

"If that fiend of a woman pokes me again, I 'll put my elbow right through her," snapped May as she stood flattened out in the long line that jostled and pushed for precedence. "This may be 'swell,' but the people evidently don't waste their manners in the vestibule!"

"Hush! don't make rude remarks; you can't tell who might hear you!"

"I hope that Austin-and-Stone monstrosity hears me! if she treads on my heels again she 'll hear more!" croaked May savagely.

"Now listen! when we get through the ticket gate, you want to fly for your life,—do you hear?"

"Where?"

"Up, up, clear to the top of the building."

"I sha'n't budge an inch! I have n't got my breath yet, hustling with all these heavy books. Can't we stay downstairs?"

"We can stand in the aisle,—and as we 're not sure of a seat upstairs, perhaps we 'd best."

"Do, for goodness' sake! I 'd rather stand till I drop. Don't stick that thing in my face again; do you hear, boy!"

"Take it; it 's the programme," whispered Merle. "You must read it while they 're playing, or in the interludes."

"I sha'n't read a word. I 've had my nose in a book all day!"

"But it has notes, descriptive, historical,—see?"

"I don't see anything but ads. Look at that brazen picture with corsets right out in plain sight!"

"Further front it tells all about it ——"

"All right. Who 's that froggy-looking man with the long coat-tails that does n't know enough to face his audience?"

"Hush-sh! it 's the conductor. He 's going to rap with his baton for them to begin. He 's famous for his beautiful hands; just watch them."

"There 's a woman—no, she 's turned back. There are two seats vacant down there, could n't we slip into them? It 's late; probably the owners are n't coming."

"It is n't allowed, but nobody 's looking, and these books *are* heavy."

May made a dash without further parley, and

settled herself noisely in an expensive seat. Merle followed, feeling uneasy, greatly doubting the wisdom of the plan, and regretting that she had consented to it.

"Don't stare round; act as if you 'd been here dozens of times and there was nothing new to see," she whispered. "There, he 's beginning. If you don't want to read the notes, close your eyes; that 's in form, and very musical."

"Goodness! is that little spurt all that!" exclaimed May, running her finger down the programme, as the conductor turned and bowed.

"No, it 's only 'A,' the first of the four movements. They 'll open the doors now and let the tardy ones in. Do you see any one aiming for these seats?"

"There 's a woman—no, she turned back. This is a lark after all, is n't it? Was n't it a good scheme of mine taking these seats?"

"Whew! just smell that vulgar odor!" sniffed Merle, as a whiff of overpowering peppermint swept across her critical nose.

"Don't keep your antennæ forever sniffing the air!" snapped May, as she choked and grew purple in her effort to swallow a contraband peppermint.

"I can't believe my senses that it 's you, May Norton!" said Merle with a withering glance. "It only shows how much you 're in need of just this

drill. You have n't outgrown the circus and peanut stage yet! Just watch that distinguished-looking young woman in front. See how she carries herself —so self-possessed—a blue-blood every inch."

"There 's red in her blood somewhere, if her nose is any indication," retorted May; "it 's the only saving grace about her, otherwise she 's cold enough to be Boston, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Transcript* all pressed into one!"

"You don't know refinement when you see it. You can go round with your ribbons thrown at your hair, and your nails like an eagle's talons if you like,—*I* shall cultivate the æsthetic!"

"Don't croak any longer—there 's a dear frog,—but tell me what that swallow-tailed conductor has gone out for. Probably to drink—I 've heard that men are depraved enough to do it between the acts!"

"He 's gone out to escort the soloist in. See the excitement! Every one 's wild to see her! We never did anything wiser, May, than to come to this!"

The soloist stepped into view amidst a thunder of applause,—a pale pink apparition, with her gauzy skirt elaborately embroidered in chenille.

"My gracious me!" hissed May in a voluble whisper, rising in her seat for a clearer view. "Just look at her skirt, Merle, it rivals the frieze of the Parthenon!"

"Sit down! every one's looking at us!" scolded Merle in an undertone, as heads turned and threatening looks were directed at them.

"Sit *down*, I said!"

"I *am* sitting!"

"Then take your foot out from under you!"

But May was past control. Some odd streak had struck her. The music was too unintelligible even to follow on her programme, and the facial contortions of the vocalist, together with the flight of the conductor's coat-tails in his excited periods, threw her into a spasm of hysterical laughter. The more Merle glowered, the more May shook. A word of reproof from a white-haired lady in front sobered her for a period, and then—something happened.

"There 's a sort of an intermission now, and the musicians go out," explained Merle. "When they come back, they 'll finish——"

"Me! if you stay a moment longer."

"The last must be the best, May, for Melba sings again; and just see the people pouring in! Be patient, and I 'll help you translate your French."

That was the last of the girls' conversation, for suddenly an usher appeared at the end of the row of seats, and stood knitting his brows as he compared the tickets in his hand with the number of the

aisle. In a moment he leaned over and questioned the girls.

"It's come! act as if nothing had happened!" Merle had time to whisper, as the usher beckoned the rightful claimants to the seats. "Don't look at them—keep your eyes front—that's the rule—it said so in the *Ladies' Home Journal.*"

Merle rose with great dignity, which her heightened color belied, and May shouldered her bag of books and rose too. But in leaning over to fold back the seat, a variegated paper bag, caught up with her books, slipped, lost its balance, and, horrors upon horrors! down went the vulgar peppermints, red and white, and scattered on the floor.

May had sufficient presence of mind to leave them alone (which was surprising), and as she crunched her way out, even had the saving grace to blush; while Merle, with boiling cheeks and prickly heat running up and down her spine, ignored one or two titters, and, squeezing past the other occupants of the row, made for the aisle.

Alas! alas! just as she reached it a detaining hand was held out—a masculine hand issuing from a black sleeve, the sleeve belonging to a frock coat, the coat belonging to a young gentleman, the young gentleman no other than—Bob! and beside him his most elegant college friend, Frank Dean!

"I did n't realize who had the seats; it must have been tiresome standing, I 'm so glad you took them, —go back,—I insist!" said Bob, in a low but imperative tone.

"Don't persecute me," pleaded Merle, with a wavering glance.

"The persecution will be mine if you leave. *Do* please me, once!" in a whisper.

The conductor raised his baton, the usher gestured for quiet, and Bob blocked the way. There was nothing to do but turn back. May crunched again over her peppermints to her seat, and dropped into it with a sigh, half of relief and half of discomfiture.

The knowledge that Bob's and his friend's eyes were not on the musicians was not especially cooling to one's cheeks; and the two pairs of long, black-trousered legs that shifted restlessly while standing, made Merle's purloined seat sharp with discomfort. What Melba sang or the orchestra played she never knew, the prospect of the homeward trip under the escort of those two defrauded males being sufficient entertainment—of a sort!

Nevertheless, Merle recovered some of her dignity and tact during the last number, and wisely decided to laugh the thing off as a joke. She succeeded far beyond her hopes, for Bob beamed at her

graciousness, and Frank was visibly affected by her charms.

"Let 's have an ice at Huyler's," suggested Bob, with the air of a man well schooled in feminine weaknesses.

May embraced the offer without reservation and recovered her spirits on the spot, and even Merle welcomed the prospect of something cooling. Indeed, when she found herself at that fashionable Mecca, surrounded by Boston's *élite*, with the Symphony programme sticking innocently out from her pocket, and with a rival escort on the watch to do her slightest bidding, Merle felt that she certainly was justified in her knowledge of the fitting.

"Oh goody! here comes Miss Prince. Don't tell about our scrape; act as if the Symphonies were a regular thing," whispered Merle in May's ear.

"Well, well! do you brave such weather?" queried the stylish new-comer as she greeted the girls.

"It gets tiresome, now the season 's so late," drawled May, "but Merle thought we ought not to miss Melba."

"Was n't she ravishing?"

"Such a skir—voice I never expect to hear again!" gushed May with an ecstatic stare at Huyler's ceiling.

"And such a programme besides! Which did you enjoy most?"

The questioner looked at Merle, but recalling the ammunition of names she had paced the room memorizing, May suddenly decided to embrace so opportune a chance and air her knowledge.

"That Batoven Con shirto, oh! was n't it sublime!"

"The which?"

"The Ba"—but here Miss Prince's attention was fortunately diverted in reaching for her soda, and Merle had time to tread on May's toes, and to whisper, "Don't say any more! You did the names fine; but that was n't played to-day—you must have seen it in the programme at the back of the book—next week's announcement."

"It don't agree with me putting on airs; I 'd get along better if you 'd let me be myself"; which May at once proceeded to be by enjoying her soda with unfashionable relish.

Merle talked condescendingly with the heretofore much-envied regular Symphony attendant, observing with a twinge of satisfaction that Miss Prince was without escort, and accepted with quite a languishing air the attentions of her handsome Bob and his distinguished companion.

"Well, I hope you've enjoyed yourself!" observed May as the door closed and the girls threw off their disguise and faced each other. "For myself—don't ever say 'Symphony' to me again!"

"Don't worry, you young Hottentot! Grow up a heathen if you like. As for me, I shall cultivate the æsthetic, as I said, and begin by going every week when I can afford a quarter."

CHAPTER XI

FLAPJACKS

"Try again, there 's a good boy, then sister 'll say the piece."

Roy sat in a heap on the floor, his baby face comically absorbed and earnest as he struggled to accomplish his first lesson in self-help,—an accomplishment, by the way, that many babies take pride in, if mothers only knew.

Suddenly the mysterious relationship between buttons and buttonholes was solved, and Roy sent his little boots flying across the room with a shout of victory, and kicked his feet free of their stockings.

"You 're a pupil to do your teacher proud," said May smiling. "Back up, and I 'll say the piece while I unbutton you:

"'Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Jews,
Takes off his stockings and puts on his shoes!

Now you say it."

"Necker—necker, ting of the tews,
Take off his tockey—and put his tooey on!"

A burst of laughter greeted Roy's rendering, and Merle, who had just come in, dropped her basket and caught him up, saying, as she spread his sea-shell toes out to the hearth's blaze:

"You 're a poet in embryo, sir, you have such a phenomenal ear for rhythmical cadence!"

Though the meaning was vague, Roy dimpled with pleasure at the tone, and proceeded to make the most of this momentary admiration by demanding the instant return of Jack and Jill, who only the night before had flown away.

"It 's needless to ask where you 've been," said Mrs. Norton, smiling from her primrose corner. "You have outstripped us all, dear, in your loyalty to the Bendonsas."

"I 've had a perfect example for many months," replied Merle with a loving smile, a smile that was fast softening the proud young face; "and besides I sometimes wonder if it 's creditable to do what one loves? I only took them some odds and ends,—it 's so hard to provide economically for two," observed the experienced housewife,—"and the pound of premium tea—father won 't drink anything short of his cherished oolong,—and the doughnuts you fried for them. Roy's shoes just fitted, and May's dress will help out the two older girls."

"I often think there was a sort of providence in

your Christmas box and disappointment after all; for we should never have found this family without those two things, and a more satisfactory one to help I can't imagine. They are willing and anxious to work, too modest for public charity, and yet grateful for every kindness we have shown them. Does Mr. Bendonsa's strength hold out, now he 's back to work?"

"He 's doing nicely, but of course being so long in the hospital made things get behind. I can understand that perfectly. If May and I had n't held that sale and stocked their pantry, and somebody had n't paid their rent this month, goodness knows where they would have been."

"Paid their rent! Why I did n't know any one knew of them but us."

"And our next-door neighbor."

"Bob? Well, the dear boy; is n't that like him, and after giving a ton of coal too!"

"He did n't tell; he 's far too modest for that; but it leaked out, and I know it for sure. I 'll help you with that cadenza, May, if you like, before I go up."

The secret about the music had long ago leaked out, for Merle's progress was extraordinary, and in a few months she had far outstripped May. She loved it, longed for it, and spent her happiest hours,

outside her scribbling, in its study. Mrs. Norton, with a mother's eye, saw a possible use that this ability could be put to in later years, and encouraged Merle to confide in her father, and to continue her lessons openly.

Since then she had afforded a better teacher by making retrenchments in the soda and confectionery line, and had created a happy little world of her own, in which she worked and dreamed.

Mrs. Norton listened to her dexterous descent of the rapid cadenza, light, graceful, and perfectly interpreted, and then to May's broken and noisy one, which bore no relation whatever to the piece of which it formed a part.

"May is no musical genius; I can see that even if I do look through a mother's eyes," mused Mrs. Norton. "There's little to her just at present, outside of arms and legs and a kind heart, but I shall not despair, for some chicks hatch late and outstrip all the firstlings." Her work dropped into her lap, and she gazed absently at the pots of pretty pink primroses that filled her corner. Evidently this disparaging comparison of her chick had brought May's "model" to her mind, for she rocked rapidly back and forth, and shook her head, saying:

"It 's the last hard bridge I have to cross with Merle, and if I win the race I shall be satisfied with

my winter's work. I'll begin to-night, for I'm in the mood, and May reads to the blind boy."

"Come down when you get through with your father and keep me company, dear," she called up the stairs, "unless you have to study. May goes out, you know."

"I'm all through except a theorem or two; after that I'm at your service."

"'Oh where, oh where has my little dog gone?
Oh where, oh where has he gone?
With his tail cut short, and his ears cut long—
Oh where, oh where has he gone?'"

sang May in burlesque grand opera style when she was ready to start.

"No doggie? well, he never did take kindly to my vocal accomplishments. Pickles Norton! where are you!"

The hall door creaked and Pickles wriggled himself through, looking very sleepy, very guilty, but humble enough to beg a thousand pardons.

"Aha! you wretch! come hither! Asleep in Roy's carriage, in his white fur robe I'll warrant! Such a prig as you're getting to be, you yellow mongrel! Shake yourself awake, and come guard your mistress, for she's without escort to-night."

"Don't stay late, dear, if you're coming home

alone. It is n't far, or I should n't let you go without one of the boys."

"Don't worry, Pickles could chew up any ordinary man, and I 'm good for two myself. Good-night."

"There is n't the slightest need of your doing those button-holes in Roy's apron, Merle, but if you will persist, turn the chair round so the light won't hurt your eyes," urged Mrs. Norton, as, May off and Roy asleep, she turned her attention to her guest for the evening.

"I 've been thinking and thinking of what you said about Bob paying that rent. I fancy it is n't a usual way for college boys to use their allowance. Whatever faults the Captain may have, there 's one thing must be placed to his credit; he does n't make a sissy of his son by nipping him in money matters. He must be liberal."

"He is, I know; and I think Bob appreciates it, and is learning to overlook some of his father's indifference in consideration of it. He speaks more pleasantly of him of late, I think."

"Then you 've been together,—I mean you and Bob. I fancied you had n't seen much of each other for a spell."

"He 's busy at college and I 'm busy at school; but we meet all the same, sometimes on the way to

school, sometimes at the Symphonies, or occasionally he runs in here, if May invites him."

"You never invite him?"

"Mercy, no! all the king's horses and all the king's men could n't drag me to ask him into my shabby little room; and you know I 've always said I drew the line at using your parlor."

"Still he 's been very kind to you; and I really think it 's no more than fair you should return what courtesy you can."

"No more than fair!—it 's perfectly heathenish that I don't. If he was n't as kind and generous as he is, he would n't waste a thought on me, for there are plenty of doors open to him if mine is n't."

"I believe in young people mingling—I never attempt to improve on nature,—and home is by far the best place to meet. You deprive yourself of a great deal of harmless pleasure, and do your friends an injustice besides, in shutting yourself up."

"It 's a great deprivation, I assure you, for I love friends; and if I had a pretty little parlor, nobody knows how I 'd enjoy it. But when it comes to inviting them into a barn, there 's no pleasure in it."

"Your sitting-room is n't a barn; and if it were perhaps your friends would enjoy *you*."

"It 's horrid to be poor; I never shall learn to accept it."

"But there are those that have learned to accept it, Merle. Many gifted men and women have led beautiful, unselfish lives despite their poverty, and in so doing have learned to count themselves superior to any trick of fortune. They were respected and beloved; and people counted it a privilege to visit their plain little homes."

"I 'm no celebrity,—there 's nothing about me to soften the prickles in my horsehair lounge. Poverty reads poetically in books, but in life it 's pure prose. Shall I make the same size buttonholes in the belt?"

"Yes, just the same. If you would unbend even a little, dear, and once break the ice, having your friends drop in on you now and then would repay you for your work, and be an incentive to keep your little nest neat and homelike."

"Sometimes I do put my foot down and say I will swallow my pride; but I 'd choke doing it, so where 's the fun?"

"I 'm glad you call it by the right name, because it *is* pride. You have a great deal, and some of it is n't a bad kind. The pride that keeps you from evading your car fare—as I hear some of the girls regularly do,—the pride that keeps you above dishonorable work in school, that makes you indignant at vulgarity of any sort, that spurs you to excel in

whatever you undertake,—all that is pride worth the having—if we are correct in calling it pride, and not honesty, integrity, a high ideal. But there is another side to your pride that does you harm. I think, dear, you sometimes show a tendency to give false impressions; and I am sure that is one reason why it is so hard for you to show your friends your circumstances as they really are."

"I did n't know it was the mark of a lady to expose all her little private shifts to the public."

" Surely not, but neither is it the mark of a lady to put on airs and to sail under false colors. Don't you think you traffic a good deal in Della's being in college? yet I 'll venture to say it has never passed your lips how she got there. Then I 've heard you refer to your distinguished relatives; and in one way or another you pose for anything but a poor man's daughter. You speak of your music lessons, but never of doing housework, and I 'll warrant not a girl of your set dreams that you have ever seen a broom. You may enjoy doing this, Merle, but at the same time you 're building a hedge around yourself that will be harder and harder to break through. Do you resent, dear, my saying this? I have no right, you know, and it 's only my love for a very lovable girl, only the wish to be the influence in her life that will help her to make herself the strong, beautiful,

purposeful woman I know she will be. Wipe away the tears, dear, and remember it takes all my courage to point out your faults; but we could n't see a charming little woman going wrong,—now, could we?

"Now listen to my plans, for I don't believe in finding fault without indicating a remedy. I propose that you give a party—wait!—not an elaborate affair, but something unique nevertheless,—I can trust you and May for that. Ask your immediate circle; have a jolly good time; and then, having broken through your ice of reserve, encourage all your friends to call."

"You can't have a party without refreshments, and the kitchen ——"

"The little hall-room that leads off the parlor would do nicely for a dining-room, now that Della 's gone and you have all exchanged rooms. We 'll put the table in there, and it is so small nobody will notice the lack of sideboard and silver."

"But the parlor carpet is so shabby, and there 's a hole in front of the stove where that live coal fell out."

"You can afford an inexpensive rug, and there are very pretty ones to be had."

"That horsehair lounge is as old as the hills!"

"Its mistress is n't, and I can think of several

individuals who will devote far more of their time and attention to her than to any lounge, shabby or otherwise."

"I—I don't think there are chairs enough to go round," faltered Merle, almost to her wits' end for objections.

"We will draw on mine. Remember also that you have several very valuable pictures and your father's wilderness of books. If you *must* produce an impression, those would go farther to that end than the furnishings of two parlors. Now for the treat."

"Oh, but I have n't said I 'd give it!"

"No; but 'just supposing,' as the children say. I think it could be made quite funny as well as original if you and May should dress yourselves as maids with pretty white caps and aprons; and I would be cook; that would do away with getting new gowns. That maple syrup your uncle sent is simply unsurpassed, and I have great luck with pancakes—men are very susceptible to pancakes, Merle! You might send out invitations to a 'Flapjack Party,' and finish up with baked apples floating in cream;—you would n't need any other sweets, and it would be a relief from the regulation ice cream and cake."

"It takes a great deal of experience to make a funny thing go off, and I should be so nervous——"

"May will help out there, and I, and your father, too."

"Father? Mercy!—I would n't dream of having him appear! He has n't mingled in society for years; and besides his best suit is shabby."

"He works hard and has few pleasures; I thought he would enjoy the fun," said Mrs. Norton, coldly.

"Oh, no; he would n't enjoy the young people at all," said Merle, hurriedly clipping her thread from the last buttonhole. There was an uncomfortable pause. "I could n't think of giving it any way," she added, rising and trying to hide a deep blush with a nonchalant yawn. "It would make a sight of work all round, and that would discount the fun."

"As you like. Thanks; that is a great help, and very nicely done. Good-night, dear."

Merle undressed, tumbled into bed, and lay there thinking, thinking, as she watched the moon rising in the clear heavens dotted with stars. Up through the elm tree's tracery it went, glinted across a window opposite, and sent a flood of light on her little blue bed, almost dazzling the thoughtful eyes of the thinker. First came a sharp spasm of regret for the manner in which she had received Mrs. Norton's kind advice and suggestions;—"And she 's always so good to me!" she murmured, remorsefully. Then the

stanza that Miss Sylvia had written in her album began to say itself through and through her mind:

"Is she kind as she is fair?
For beauty lives with kindness.
Love doth to her eyes repair
To help him of his blindness,
And, being helped inhabits there."

"Oh! I 'm not kind," she cried,—"I 'm horrid, selfish, ungrateful, and worldly. Dear Lord, please help me not to be so proud! For I want to have friends and to be loved—oh, I do—I do!"

Merle buried herself under the bed-clothes and sobbed out her prayer for help,—a broken, simple, tearful little prayer, rich in nothing but sincerity, which counts most with the Great Presence, I suspect.

And there, under the clothes, she must have found her answer, for she emerged suddenly and smiled at the Man in the Moon, who seemed to smile back at her. "It 's a sort of a Launcelot Gobbo affair," she mused. "My conscience says; 'Give the party; break up this foolish pride.' The fiend says: 'Not on your life! Suit yourself, lady, and seal yourself up like a shrimp blown into a bottle.' Ah, well, my conscience counsels the better, and I 'll fly the fiend; which means that I 'll trample this pride underfoot, beg Mrs. Norton's pardon, give the party, pay a

little of my social indebtedness; and the dear old Philosopher shall see the fun, too!"

Merle never wavered in her purpose, for in two weeks' time a dozen or more curiously shaped envelopes were posted after dark in the red letter-box at the corner.

For days prior there had been chaos in the upper rooms, with much clipping, pasting and subscribing. Billows of crêpe paper floated about, yards of baby ribbon dangled from the table, and pots of quince glue surprised the unwary. An enterprising firm had illustrated the efficacy of their magic raising powder by pictures of a very toothsome and realistic griddle-cake. These were cut out, prettily lined, and two tied together with the gay ribbon. Within the favored recipient read his or her invitation to this novel Flapjack Party.

This initial step accomplished, the little suite underwent upheaval. The faded carpet was three times swept with tea leaves; then Merle finished Bridget's work by getting down on her proud knees and restoring some of its pristine brightness by a bath of ammonia and water. Windows were washed, curtains were rehung, almost defiant in their starchy whiteness; and the objectionable horsehair lounge was softened in aspect by a stray portière,—the effect being voted very artistic and quite natural;

though May, having tested its stability in a suspicious moment, and finding her fears justified when she landed on the floor with the portière and two pillows on her head, wisely decided to eschew the joys of this toboggan slide on the night in question.

The valued pictures were rehung to the best advantage; a new rug disguised the carpet's mishap; and the parlor stove, which was on the plan of an open grate, its front being made to slide back and display the growing coals within, was a seven days' wonder. Such a phenomenal polish did Bridget give it that Pickles made three lightning revolutions round its mirrored surface, and failing to account for the brazen mongrel that dogged his every step, gave up the chase, and sat down to contemplate his personal charms in amazed quiet.

Mrs. Norton was unfailing in her help, and dear, generous-hearted May offered every object in the home below from the parlor carpet to her square piano.

"Don't, my dear, or you 'll defeat my plans," whispered Mrs. Norton as she waylaid May in the hall. "I 've just been denouncing 'borrowed plumes,' and I don't want her little room made much different from what it will have to be when this night is over and her friends call."

"Do you feel satisfied, my dear?" queried Mrs. Norton, as she stood waiting, in cook's cap and apron, on the eventful night.

"Yes; thanks to you and May," answered Merle, heartily, artistically festooning some running smilax over a mirror, and incidentally viewing the bewitching little bunch of lace and ribbon that sat jauntily on her soft waves of hair, and matched in coloring the microscopic apron with its dots of pockets which completed her costume as maid.

"Shall I put these on the mantel or the what-not?" questioned the second maid, in blue, as she stood revolving on the new rug, with a vase of flowers in each hand.

"It 's too warm there," replied the hostess; "put them on the window. The sills are wide, and I shall leave the shades up, for I love to look into a roomful of happy people, and perhaps it will cheer some lonely passer-by."

Merle smiled affectionately at the second maid, smoothed the ravishing bow of her apron strings, looked critically at the angle of the lace cap, and whispered as she fastened a sprig of lily of the valley in her companion's dress:

"You 're a dear to get yourself up so carefully for my sake; and I advise Willard to look to his manners, for you 're fast getting to be a beauty, May."

"Ditto, Miss Elliot. I suspect the soap I used has mirrored your face in mine,—if so, I die happy! happy! Whose flowers shall you wear, Bob's or Frank's?"

"Neither. When the bell rings, your post is at the door, remember; mine is at the head of the stairs, and your mother will take care of them here,—mercy! there it goes!"

May flew to her post, and bowed in the first group, whom Merle greeted at the head of the stairs, directing the girls to her little blue room, the young men to her father's.

In a twinkling the house seemed swarming with young people; and Merle, who had not had a moment's qualm, and scarcely a moment's respite from greetings, peered round the corner to see how Mrs. Norton and her father were faring within.

The surprise she received was vivid, for her father, whom she expected to find ensconced behind his books, or huddled into the sofa corner, was actually in the middle of the room, bowing with old-time courtesy to the tripping maidens, and shaking cordially the young men's hands.

Her eyes wandered from his handsome white head down to the black velvet coat—a relic of better days—and rested on a little bud he had fastened, unknown to her, in its lapel. She stepped back hastily

to her place saying to herself: "Mrs. Norton was right, he does enjoy the fun, and he looks so like Longfellow I 'm proud of him."

"They 've all come but Bob," telegraphed May from her post. "I think I 'll put the door on the chain and come up; he may be late getting over from college."

Bob was late, decidedly so, and quite contrite when Merle left her guests and greeted him in the hall, saying as she hung up his ulster—she wished to be kind—she was sure there was something would not please him to-night:

"Nobody missed you but May and me; so don't apologize—your flowers tide you over this misdemeanor, sir."

"Just be careful of that ulster, please; don't jam the pockets."

Merle felt her first moment of discomfort when Bob stepped over her door-sill, for his six feet of height seemed to shrink her little room into a doll's. But Bob was very popular with the feminine element, being handsome, and also tactful to the point of art. He understood pleasing, and did it seemingly without effort; and his entrance into any room meant a flutter of pleasant excitement. Merle perceived this, and took pleasure in the knowledge—took pleasure in another knowledge likewise. She was human

like the best of us, and was proud of her budding power.

"There 's the queerest noise every time I go into the hall," observed May, pausing on the threshold and addressing the assembled party, "a sort of squeak—smothered like."

"I might as well own up, then," announced Bob, stepping forward, "and at the same time account for my ill manners in being late. I cut through the alley to the Square,—it 's a filthy place, but I wanted to save time,—and before I got out I heard the cries of some suffering animal. I struck a light, and there in a pail were two struggling, drowning kittens. It seemed wicked to torture them so, when five cents worth of chloroform would do the work painlessly, so I pocketed them. That 's what you heard in my ulster, May."

Merle hurried out to the hall, after having repaid Bob for his humanity with her most approving smile and presently returned with two wet, cold balls of fur.

"Let 's name them and raise them," suggested May . "You need a cat in your apartment, Merle; and Bob, your butler was borrowing one a short time ago."

"Well, let 's," laughed Merle. "You name one, Bob, and I 'll name the other."

"All right," said Bob; "I make over my rights in one of them to you with pleasure. Take your choice, Miss Elliot; and we 'll give you two minutes to find a name."

"You need n't do that; I 've thought of one already. I shall name mine something edible, for the refreshments of this party are on my mind just now, and thought runs easily in that channel. How would 'Waffles' do?"

"Good! good!" shouted the group. "Look to your laurels, Bob; you 'll never equal that."

"Must it be something edible?"

"Of course. Nothing else will be accepted."

"It ought to be feminine, too," observed Frank, "for that one winked her eye at me then."

"I have it," cried Bob: 'Sally Lunn.'"

A shout of applause caused Sally Lunn to wink both eyes, which was taken to signify her acceptance of the name. The kittens were then taken to the kitchen and fed with warm milk, after which May wrapped them up in Merle's best fur collarette, being pressed for time!

This unexpected episode broke the ice, and not a slippery spot was found the whole evening long; for after Merle had exhausted her plans for amusement, and was momentarily aghast to find how soon she would be forced to play her refreshment card, her

father astonished her by coming into the room with a deep bowl of water and a small battery. With the aid of several interested young men he soon charged the water, tossed some new dimes and pennies to the bottom, and invited the company to help themselves!

The young ladies rolled up their sleeves, the young men tore off their cuffs, and then there were such comically abortive dives into the prickly water and such merry shouts of laughter as warmed the cockles of Merle's heart and made the Philosopher beam.

It was the event of the evening, and came precious near to consuming more than its share of time. As it was it took all Mrs. Norton's diplomacy to cool the enthusiasm, turn down the lights, and prevail on the group to watch the glowing grate, telling stories if need be, that they might be in readiness to fill the dining-room the moment the cook gave the signal.

Chairs were drawn into a circle, and the young people prepared to draw lots for the story-teller, when a mossy substance settled over the glowing coals of the open grate, and in a twinkling leaped up into purple, pink, and lemon flames.

"Oh! oh! is n't it beautiful, girls! girls!"

More lights, green, amber, and orange, shot up in tongues of astonishing beauty. Where did it come from? Who was the necromancer?

Merle's eyes followed an outstretched hand up a black velvet sleeve, up, up to the face of her white-haired Philosopher, and there rested. She saw no more of the fire's beauty, saw only the animated face in its frame of white, thought of her wrestle with conscience and her little prayer for help, and breathed another—there in the crowded room—a little prayer of thankfulness for its consummation. Her lips trembled, and her eyes filled unchecked, feeling secure in the room's gloom and the fascination of the kaleidoscopic flames.

But another pair of eyes were neglecting the chemist's work, a dark-brown pair, with infinite promises in their soulful depths. They rested on a slight girlish figure in a white cap and apron, on a pair of gray eyes filled with tears, and on pretty lips that trembled; and such wonderful divination did these brown eyes have that they turned from the pretty tableau and glanced at the handsome white face silhouetted by the fire's glow. They understood —those brown eyes.

Such a tight fit as that dining-room was! but no sideboard nor silver was noticed as lacking, for the golden-brown flapjacks, the very acme of art, disarmed the most critical; while the sight of the Shaw girl cutting a pie-shaped wedge out of a pile four flapjacks high, with sleeves rolled back on very thin

arms (as Merle observed), caused the young hostess to think favorably ever after of "that Shaw girl."

The next course, of baked apples flecked with amber jelly, rolled in chipped nuts, and swimming in saucers of rich cream, produced a lull in conversation that surely gave "proof of the pudding."

"It 's no use, I can't talk,—somebody do it for me," remarked Miss Prince, accepting her third apple without the slightest pretence of hesitation. "And this cake—I should think the gods made it!"

"No god," laughed Merle. A week ago she would not have acknowledged it, but she did to-night, though she blushed prettily under her jaunty cap as, looking up, she observed a gentleman opposite eating it with such sudden reverence that her glance returned to her plate again.

"It 's *the* event of the season!" Merle overheard one of the girls remark in the dressing-room. "I never had such fun in my life. What a distinguished-looking man her father is."

"Did you notice that Copley over the mantel? and those roses on the window? One vase was from Bob, the other from his friend Frank Dean—that light-haired fellow with the watch fob."

"It was n't a bit fashionable, and I thought flapjacks would be no end vulgar, but they were n't. It 's such a relief, after all, to unbend, and not fall over

maids and butlers, and be in terror lest you 're not doing things properly."

"What a charming hostess Merle made! She's simply divine when she unbends; I could fall in love with her myself."

"And she treats Bob so courteously. I saw her when he brought her a glass of water in the hall, and she was so sweet in thanking him; yet every one knows she could walk on him if she liked, and he 'd be more than gratified at the distinction."

"That Frank Dean, they say, the one that gave her that second bunch of flowers, was with her at the Symphony last week. I thought Bob and he were a little cool to-night."

"They need n't either of them worry. Merle is n't the style to engage herself young. She has so much character, she 'll want to have a career first."

"Most any of us would be glad to relieve her if she finds two a burden."

Merle crept back to her post, fortunately having heard only the first of this chatter, for she was too honorable to go on eavesdropping, and look up her proper position, for her guests were going. Now and then she took account of stock round the banister railing, and nearly fell off her perch in beholding her father, standing with a paper fool's-cap on his white head, and with a bright, merry light in his

tired eyes, as he joked with a pink-cheeked witch of a girl, who threw back her head in unforced laughter.

Merle's balance received a second shock when the aristocratic Miss Prince shook his hand cordially, saying with a pretty grace: "I 've always wanted to meet Longfellow, and I feel as if I had had my wish to-night."

By the time Merle took her third peep, she really succumbed and was forced to recover by sitting on the hall stand, for the girls were actually kept waiting in the lower hall for escort, while her father, surrounded by a bevy of interested young men, was explaining chemical and physical laws with the glibness of a true philosopher.

By some mysterious manipulation of wires, Bob was the last to go. May had deserted her post as door-tender and considerately turned the light low. Merle, intoxicated with her night's success, and with various emotions in conflict, descended to bow out this her last guest.

"Good-night," said she, with a formal hand-shake, and in a tone as distant as the poles. "Good-night. I—— should be pleased to have you call—and—and I 'm glad if you 've had a pleasant evening."

Bob threw up his hat in a burst of laughter, then sobered suddenly, and said:

"Why this distant tone, neighbor?"

"I did n't mean—my! how dim it's grown—turn up the gas so you can see. Mrs. Norton says the pipes must be frozen, the light goes up and down so."

"I can see perfectly all I want, thanks,—and the only frozen thing round is me."

"I did n't mean," faltered Merle with a finger in each of her dimity pockets, "I did n't mean——"

But suddenly the little pockets were relieved of their burden, and her hands held captive in a strong clasp, as Bob whispered with a mixture of fun and earnestness:

"It won't do a bit of good, you paragon of artlessness; the debt is growing—mark my word—and you 've held off so long in allowing me to call that I can't even reduce the rate of interest!"

CHAPTER XII

PRANKS

"Shall I go through the middle arch?"

"As you like, Captain."

"What a perfectly beatific frame of mind you 're in. Canoeing agrees with you, Willard."

"Right you are, my lady. I never feel so patriotic, so proud of my country's flag, as when I 'm pillowed luxuriously, floating noiselessly along, with nothing more burdensome to do than watch a charming Captain at the helm. Would n't our English cousins with their prudent mammas, and the French girls with their inevitable chaperons, fall in a faint at the sight of us?"

"Of course girls have more freedom in this country, and so long as they don't turn it into license no one complains. But really, Willard, I was astonished myself that mother should agree to this canoeing, for she hates water like a cat, and has always had the fidgets about my skating. Mothers have to learn to be very unselfish for their children,

don't they? for while I 'm intoxicated with the beauty here, she, poor dear! is shaking in her boots every time the bell rings, or a quick step sounds on the porch."

"I think she felt it would interfere with others' pleasures as well as yours, for she knows I 've saved all winter to get the canoe."

"She made very few restrictions and I shall obey them to the letter; I can do that much," said May soberly. "I 'm not to roll up my sleeves as if I were ready to wash out a tub of clothes; I can't lounge among the pillows, or paddle with any young man that smokes. She asked me to be prudent, too, —not rush into danger, she means. That is n't so easy, but I shall try. Don't I do well for a beginner?"

"Great. Put your hand a trifle lower down— you 're getting the wrist movement to perfection. Don't use quite so much force,—there, that 's better."

"It 's just impossible to realize all the fun in store for us this summer with both you boys having canoes. Just think of the larks we 'll have, with floats, moonlight, and picnics!"

May straightened her shoulders and drew in a deep breath of the glorious spring air. It was early in the season, but the day was warm and redolent of budding life. The blue sky flecked with billows of

fleecy clouds went sailing along in the river's clear reflection; along the water's edge the tinted willows mirrored a hint of yellow green; button-bushes, alder and hazel shrubs hugged one another amicably, promising a close covert for nesting birds, and at the present several pairs were prospecting, doubtless with an eye to housekeeping.

This was in those golden days before graphophones and steam tugs with their churning paddles drowned the redwing's merry *kon-ker-ri* and the song sparrow's wooing; before a rough and inappreciative rabble broke the quiet of the river's sylvan beauty; before a lover's kiss was held in bounty with a commissioner's record on it.

Keenly alive to the beauty about her, May scanned the sky, the quickening shores, the rippling waters that stretched in dazzling beauty before her. Each quiet dip of her little paddle cut its crystal clearness into diamonds of many facets, dimpling the waters into sparkling and playful eddies. Something of its charm subdued her, for her face softened and she recited dreamily,—

"O little buds, break not so fast!
The spring 's but new.
The skies will yet be brighter blue
And sunny too.

I would you might thus sweetly last
Till this glad season 's overpast,
  Nor hasten through.

It is so exquisite to feel
  The light, warm sun;
  To merely know the winter done
  And life begun;
And to my heart no blooms appeal
For tenderness so deep and real
  As any one

Of these first April buds, that hold
  The hint of spring's
  Rare perfectness that May-time brings.
Oh, linger, linger, nor unfold
Too swiftly through the mellow mould,
  Sweet growing things!

And errant birds, and honey bees,
  Seek not to wile;
  And sun, let not your warmest smile
  Quite yet beguile
The young peach bows and apple trees
To trust their beauty to the breeze;
  Wait yet awhile!'

"Is n't that a dear thing? I found it somewhere, and could n't leave it alone."

May sent her little shallop through the waters, and continued, awakening from her Nature-worship,—"Has Bob launched his?"

"He floated her yesterday, I believe. He 's probably somewhere on the river now."

"What color?"

"Birch-bark. Gee whiskers! is n't she a beaut."

"Merle loves birch-bark; she hates red," laughed May, peering over the side of her little craft.

"I did n't buy this to suit *her*. Red is very artistic, I think, darting in and out among the green."

"When we get the scarlet cushions done, and float our Harvard flag, and mother has finished my red shirt-waist, won't we scare the turtles? What color is Bob's."

"He has a strip of velour carpet about two inches thick, reaches from one end to t' other—moss-green; and all the cushions match,—silk, I believe."

"Oh, Merle dotes on moss-green."

"I inferred as much. I tell you Bob's making hay while the sun shines."

"I did n't think the sun would shine for him this week, with Merle off to her sister at college. It was such a sacrifice for her to go, dear girl,—so many things happened in a bunch; but she went, and

perhaps the change will do her good. Mother does n't think she 's looking well, I know."

"Several things happened to Bob in a bunch last week."

"Go back and sit down on your cushion, Pickles! You can't have that bullfrog! Make him sit down, Willard. What do you mean about Bob?"

"I was n't told not to tell, though Bob kept it quiet himself. He was twenty-one last week."

"Is that all? I was seventeen a short time ago, but I did n't observe any meatoric fall."

"Ah, but don't you know what it meant for Bob? It meant he was of age and had come into his mother's property."

"No! don't say it—you take all the life out of me. Is it much?"

"A few paltry thousands. I don't really know how much; only I remember once when Bob was having it cool with the Captain, he said the time was n't far distant when he 'd be independent. Why don't you rejoice?"

"Rejoice! Don't you see he can marry now, and I had banked on his being kept under the Captain's heel for years to come. I did n't want to lose Mer —" Becoming aware of her indiscretion, May stopped short.

"Well, a girl could look farther and do worse,"

remarked Willard, drily. "I expected there 'd be a blow-out at his coming of age, and he 'd treat the crowd in style; but he went off somewhere."

"What night was it?"

"Wednesday."

"He and Merle went to the opera. She loves music you know, and had never been. I can see her now; she was wild with joy, and did n't get over it for days after. Oh, he 'll woo and win her with his music, for he plays divinely, and she just sits with her soul in her eyes and listens."

"It seemed to me that Bob had made some sage resolve, and determined the day should be a new leaf in his life; he seemed so much older and quieter, as if the responsibility had squared his shoulders, and he meant to do right."

"Oh dear, we 're a precocious lot," sighed May; "we 're no sooner out of swaddling clothes than we wear wedding rings."

"Some are in such a rush they wear them before it 's legal. Don't! Don't! Put in your paddle, and I 'll be good."

"Here 's Grace married and gone, Merle tottering on the brink, and I feel fifty since I put my hair up."

"Charming metamorphosis, ma'am. I 've been watching that little curl wave. At what age shall you assume the matrimonial yoke?"

"Never!"

"Ah, that's the kind gets gobbled first. There never was an old maid that 'never' made. They 're a misfit anyhow,—last year's styles shelved. Don't spoil that curl!"

"Behave yourself, or I 'll singe every one off—what ails you to-day?"

"'In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love'!"

"In the spring take Adams' Sarsaparilla for that tired feeling! It 's your liver, laddie; you look sallow."

"A love potion might cure me; try it and see."

"I should bungle, and you 'd wake up and find yourself worshipping an ass's head. Ask Blanche. She 'd take to it like a duck to water."

"Ah, woe is me! Blanche won't do. I must have yellow curls, blue eyes, pink cheeks, and a dimpled chin."

"I 'm going to land and leave you to recover; when you feel normal, whistle, and I 'll return—if I have n't in the meantime found a better escort."

"Sweet turtle, don't hide your pretty head. Come out—come out! no love-shaft of mine shall pierce your shell to-day. No answer! (She 's mad, Pickles.)

IN THE SPRING

"O we fell out, I know not why,
And kissed again with tears;
And blessings on the falling out
That all the more endears."

She 's smiling. (Now watch the metamorphosis, Pickles, while I do a sleight of hand.) Captain! I said Bob had plans—don't think the canoe absorbs them all. What would you think of a month's camping out—steady! steady! you can't jump like that in a canoe; you 'll have us all to the bottom. Pickles, sit down! else you sha'n't be my mascot."

"Oh, Willard, are you tricking me?"

"No trick, ma'am; gospel truth. There 's others besides your mother who don't think Merle is looking well, I guess. However, it 's a secret now, and only underground wires are laid. But Bob suggested it, said it would n't cost much,—which means he 'd pay most of the bills,—spoke of a chaperon, wanted to know how many made a comfortable party, and said he preferred a kitchen and a servant to any Utopian division of work."

"I can't imagine anything so perfectly lovely happening in this crooked world—why the mere thought of it will help me through these last weeks of school; and goodness knows I need help. A whole month in the woods, with nothing but fun! fun! fun!

Pickles, come here till I squeeze you! I believe I could forget in camping out some of the agonies I 've endured this term. I have n't told you, Willard, but I 've had suicidal tendencies of late, and this spring vacation came just in the nick of time to save two lives—mine and Miss Black's—the chemistry teacher."

"Skirt the shore now, and hold on to the bushes while we exchange places," said Willard, rising with due circumspection. "I promised your mother I 'd never do it in the open. You 've paddled enough, my boy, so luxuriate among the cushions. Tuck your paddle under the carpet (I bought yours shorter than mine), and tell me about the beloved Miss Black; I think I 've heard of her before."

"Well, to begin with, we commenced the term by cordially hating each other. I was cautioned not to get on the wrong side of her, and tried my best to be diplomatic for once. I might have succeeded, but one recess when the girls were standing round her desk, I came in unexpectedly, and I knew at once she had been saying something about me. When I went into the hall Miss George followed and said:

"'Oh, Miss Norton, you ought to have heard what Miss Black said of you. Somebody intimated that you were pretty, and she replied: "All but her chin," and stuck her own out to illustrate,—the viper! "It's

odd," she continued, "and original, and one in a class will do very well, but imagine having to face fifty'!" Now, I don't pose for a beauty, but I never knew I had a Punch and Judy chin before; and —well—remarks are n't pleasing, anyhow."

"What creatures women are! You 'd never catch a man teacher saying such Tommy-rot."

"I forgave her after a spell, and did fairly well in chemistry, for I liked the laboratory messes. Finally we had a lesson on chlorine, and bleached little pieces of colored calico. She told us to take them home, draw a design on cardboard, and paste them on. They were to be exhibited on Visitors' Day to illustrate the bleaching properties of chlorine. Drawing is my one decent point, and I rather enjoyed the task, but I could n't think of any design that would be appropriate. There 's nothing very handsome about bleached rags, you know, and I was just giving up in despair when one rainy day I took the car home, and as I sat staring at the advertisements overhead, I noticed that one which we 're so familiar with,—a great black whale with a white spot scrubbed on his side, and under it printed 'Soapine did it.' 'Just the thing,' says I. So I drew a jolly big whale, spouting like a dozen hose-pipes, and I pasted my rags so that the bleached ends met on his side, and wrote under it, 'Chlorine did it!' It

looked grand; Roy was afraid of it, and Merle said it was very original. I thought how proud mother 'd be if it should be exhibited, as I 'm such a dunce usually; so I went to school early and laid it on the laboratory desk. I was n't present when Miss Black came in,—I 'd gone up to the class-room,—but Miss George was, and supplied me with facts.

"She said Miss Black sat down to her desk smiling, and began going through the pile of designs. Some of them were lovely,—flowers made of pink and blue cloths that the chlorine had just tinted. Finally she came to my whale, and Miss George said no terms in Webster's Unabridged would define the expression of her face. The nearest illustration she could give was to suppose that an offal cart had passed close by her unexpectedly; for she looked appealingly at the girls as if for salts, or an open window, or a tonic to bridge her over the trouble; and then took the nippers, picked up the whale by the edge and lowered it into the trash-basket at arm's length! I never saw or heard of that poor, unappreciated whale again, as you may suppose, but I hauled down my flag of truce then and there, and, Miss Black is probably recuperating. For, oh! Willard, have n't I made her dance the hornpipe! There 's no fear of my being left over in chemistry, she 'll pass me if she has to cheat!"

"Doubtless she *is* recuperating this week. It 's very short-sighted in a chemistry teacher to get on the wrong side of such a customer as you, May," laughed Willard.

"The first dose I gave her was the day we made sulphuretted hydrogen. 'It 's a neat little experiment, girls,' she said, 'and I don't want you to miss any of it, (I looked out *she* did n't) ; 'but the odor is—not pleasant, and you must be careful to keep your pipes under water, and not discharge it into the room. It illustrates nicely the absorption of noxious gas in water, and explains why we keep our traps filled in plumbing and add glycerine sometimes to prevent H_2O evaporating.'

"Mine generated fine, and as soon as I saw the water kind of quivering, I lifted out the tube quietly and took the pole and closed up the window, complaining of a draft. Goodness! Willard, in a wink of time I 'd been glad to get out myself! Did you ever smell it? That 's what nothing in the dictionary could describe! In a twinkle pandemonium was let loose. Sir Tom came kiting down to the basement, collared the janitor on the way, and they both flew into the room, slammed up the transom, yanked down every window, and Sir Tom glared at Miss Black, and said he thought he gave orders not to put five hundred people in purgatory again until the

laboratory was supplied with a hooded flue! Neat little experiment, was n't it? I wonder if she connected it with the whale?

"I think Milton must have performed that experiment in his youth," May added, reflectively, "he seems so conversant with the properties of sulphur, and I understood *Paradise Lost* much better myself afterward. Lines like, 'A fiery deluge, fed with ever-burning sulphur unconsumed,' make the picture so realistic when you can smell it too!—Why, here comes the birch-bark! Ah there! Bob!"

"Ah there, yourself!"

"You look lonely."

"Looks are deceiving."

"Come, join us and hear May's latest school bulletin," said Willard. "It will remind you of your lost youth, boy."

"Come, join us and hear Merle's latest bulletin, that will be nearer his heart," laughed May, waving a fat letter tantalizingly. "See, he hesitates."

"Is she well?" called Bob, poising his paddle.

"Very well, thanks; and convenient to Amherst,—did you think of that?" said May mischievously. "Don't let us detain you, but if you happen round at lunch time we have a drum-stick to spare."

"That 's a bribe worth considering. I 'm practising now. *Au revoir;* we 'll meet again probably."

"Practising!" laughed May, as Bob's canoe disappeared round the bend. "And hunting up all the little lovers' lanes to boot."

"Go on with your Miss Black, and leave Bob to his business. Did you play your trump card with the sulphuretted hydrogen?"

"Bless your heart, that was only the beginning! The next experiment I had a chance to strike home was the day we made oxygen and hydrogen and combined them. Miss Black was very much occupied with some of her favorites in the opposite corner of the room, admiring their new alpaca aprons, which she had encouraged the girls to have made so dainty and frail they looked like party rigs, so her absorption left the coast clear for me. I made a double quantity, and when I brought the two gases together and ignited them—O ye gods! such a report! I thought I'd lost every eye-winker; and the girls screamed and dropped their test-tubes; and Sir Tom came flying down again; and Miss Black just stood rooted to the platform. Finally she made for me, and I acted dazed and faint-like, and mumbled something about mother did n't approve of these dangerous laboratory experiments."

Willard shook with sympathetic laughter, remembering some neat little experiments of like nature that had lightened the tedium of his own chemical

course, while May wiped up her merry tears, saying:

"I 'm choked for a drink. I must have it before I tell you about the lobster, Willard, for that 's the best of all."

"I might paddle down to the bend and see if I can't find the spring over the hill. This water is too brackish to drink. Forget your thirst, and start on the lobster."

"Well, you see, the zoölogy or biology teacher, whatever you call her, was sick. It was too near the end of the term for the classes to miss a single lesson, so the task of substituting fell to Miss Black. I guess she did n't know the nature of the beast, for she left the squids so long in alcohol that two of the girls in 'A' fainted. I heard Tommy telling her in the hall about them. 'The specimens are spoiled,' says he. 'Send over to the fish market and get a dozen or so of lobsters—they 're easy, and will do.'

"When we filed into the laboratory, there they were, one for every two girls. Mine was a bouncer, big and sweet-smelling, and I laid my plans at once, for my lunch was a little short that day. I listened attentively to the lesson; he 's a crustacean, you know; and I poked his 'swimmerett' and his 'terminal paddles,' and all along his sides where he

breathes; and he has quite a nervous system, ganglia and all that,—and they *do* feel being boiled, Willard. Promise me you 'll never eat one boiled alive."

"Promise."

"When Miss Black was drawing his tail on the blackboard, I sent out some interesting little notes, and the class tumbled, to a girl. She was still busy at the blackboard when we filed out and the next section filed in. She never turned, Miss George says, but opened the lesson by remarking:

"Doubtless the specimen you see before you, young ladies, is familiar to you all."

Then some one giggled and she turned, and oh! Great Cæsar's ghost! there was n't a lobster in the room!

"See if they were collected by mistake, Miss George, and placed in the pickle closet," says she. No, they were not there.

"Miss George, ask the master to please step down." Miss George says her face was livid, with green lines beside her nose. Well, Sir Tom knows a thing or two—bless his buttons! He would n't budge.

Miss Black grew greener, Miss George says, and sent up the second time, but no Sir Tom appeared.

"Very well," said she, "I can't teach without specimens, so you may all file into the chemical

laboratory, and make up any arrears you may have in that work."

"Perhaps you would like to know where those lobsters were?" laughed May. "Several were in the basement barrel, a couple on the stairs, a few in the dressing room, and one—fortunately for Miss Prince, Sir Tom was not on a foraging tour—behind the venerable Homer, in the Hall of Fame, as we call the general assembly room since Sir Tom closed its works of art to the herd. Only one found its way into the class-room. That was mine, Willard. Somehow it had found its way into my desk. The next hour was a study hour, and Miss Grieg, the history teacher, was in charge.

"Oh! such a lark as I had with that lobster, Willard! I cracked his claws by dropping the desk-cover on them, and Miss Grieg never tumbled, but asked for 'less noise in the north corner, please!' and all the girls had a bite and I had a good many. All was going nicely, I was just finishing the swimmerett parts, when I heard my name called, and I blinked up over the desk-cover.

"'Miss Norton, may I trouble you to close your desk and pursue your studies in the open?' I complied, but just as she looked back to her book, as I supposed, I blew her a kiss. She saw it, and I knew all was up with me then.

"'Miss Norton, are you studying?'

"'Yes, Miss Grieg.' Was n't I dissecting that beast? had n't I been in a brown—no red—study for the last twenty minutes?" choked May. "But she suspected—wise woman!—and said, 'Please bring me whatever you have of interest in your desk!'

"O Willard! never say die! Only a few weeks ago we had a time with the histories. It came up about the massacre of St. Bartholomew. The Roman Catholic girls took umbrage, and our histories were changed. The new one had the objectionable part left out, and so the Protestants hated it, and refused to recite from it. We used to study out of *Myer*, and left the other girls—the Catholics—to use the new histories. I had covered mine in black, in mourning for my beloved Swinton, and had drawn the map of Ireland on the cover in green chalk. I remembered this and lifted it out over the lobster, and made for Miss Greig's desk. I did n't smile, my face was expressionless, Miss Prince said, but as I laid it under Miss Greig's nose her glasses flew off, she sneezed twice and left the room, and I—I went back to my lobster! O Willard! I 'm not through yet. You see I did n't feel sure whether Miss Black knew the source of her trouble, or not; and as I had further plans I lingered in the hall waiting to see

her go, and as I waited I composed this,—a parody I believe they call it:

"'The school gong sounds the knell of parting day;
The jolly herd winds swiftly forth and free;
Miss Black doth homeward wend her weary way.
And leaves the coast quite clear, you see, for me.'"

"Is n't that jolly? Then I descended to the chemical laboratory, drew the fiercest-looking lobster with red chalk on the blackboard, his legs posed as if he was swimming, and his eyes protruding, and waves under him marked H_2O, and above it I wrote:

"'Young ladies, doubtless the specimen you see before you is familiar to you all!' and below—

"'Lobsters 15 cts. per lb. Two lbs. for a quarter.'

"Then I enclosed it and wrote 'Reserve'; for the janitor erases all work not so safe-guarded. I brought Merle down behind the door, and she took one look, and just doubled up on the floor like a jack-knife. 'O May!' she cried, 'if Miss Black does n't tumble to that whale now, she deserves to have some of the green boiled out of her!' That 's all. You see now what I mean by recuperating. We both needed a little rest."

May settled back, feeling content with her share of the afternoon's entertainment; while Willard, proud of this merry companion, patterned after his

own heart, paddled swiftly along in quest of the much desired water to drink.

"There, I think this is the place," observed the paddler, running his canoe in-shore. I don't dare leave this canoe alone, it 's too new to run the risk of losing it; so you hold on to the bushes, please, and wait till I return."

May watched the retreating figure climb the hill and disappear over its brow, and then turned her glance to the wide expanse of river that stretched clear and beautiful before her. Now and then a little skiff darted silently along; birds winged across or dipped gracefully to its surface; and every sunny stump and mossy rock held its colony of little woodfolk.

Something of the freedom of nature filled May's every breath and gave birth to a new purpose, for the dream in her blue eyes suddenly sharpened and she turned quickly toward Pickles—Pickles, who with every yellow hair on end, with bulging eyes and snapping jaws, was making savage thrusts at a very patriarch of a turtle, who blinked his sleepy eyes unmoved, and doubtless observed with Emerson: "Why so hot, my little man—why so hot?"

"There 's a country somewheres, Pickles," observed May, "where they throw their infants into the water to teach them to swin. Mother says responsibility

is the best of teachers, and if I should paddle down to the next bend and back, I 'd learn more in five minutes alone than in a month with Willard."

Quick as thought May pushed off and went bobbing gaily down-stream, her paddle cutting the water into little whirlpools, while Pickles sat erect in the stern with an expression of canine dignity comical to see.

"How well we go! it 's no effort at all; just see how the bank glides by, Pickles." Pickles observed, licked his snub nose, and wriggled joyfully.

"Now we 'll turn back and surprise Willard with our skill. He showed me how. You put your paddle in so, give it a twist, and around she goes!"

But, however dextrous May's twist, the little canoe glided merrily along with no slightest sign of turning. Having tried again and again, she grew alarmed and looked back for signs of Willard.

"It 's the current," she said, looking down at the deep, gliding water. "That 's the reason we sweep along so. O dear, I wish I 'd been prudent and hugged the shore, for how ever shall I get back!"

May wrung her hands in despair, watched the bank glide swiftly by with far different feelings from those of a moment ago, and then felt a sudden hope as a tall figure ran out on the land point, and Willard's halloo reached her.

"Get to the shore somehow!" screamed the frightened voice. "Don't turn the bend, on your life! Remember—the falls!"

May barely caught the last word, for her canoe was hurried along not only by a swift current at this part of the river, but more rapidly still as it neared the falls that fell only a short run beyond the bend.

The color died out of May's face, and her hands fell nerveless in her lap, as, after a frantic struggle, the canoe swept round the bend and brought the terrifying roar of the falls to her ears.

Willard, who had not learned to swim, tore up and down the bank, hatless, coatless, wringing his hands in misery, and calling desperately for help. May's position was dangerous in the extreme, and momentarily growing more so. Nothing equals the agony of inaction, and Willard tasted it to the full in those few never-to-be-forgotten moments.

Then a birch-bark canoe drifted idly on the scene, its occupant being apparently half-asleep. In a flash his repose was broken.

"Bob! For Heaven's sake—May and the falls!"

Bob straightened up; swift as a bird the canoe took wing, flew to the bank, and Willard sprang in. No word was spoken, but both sent their paddles clear in to the neck, and the birch-bark canoe shot like a

meteor down-stream. On, on she sped, bent to the water's edge, with every muscle swelling on the strong arms that manned her.

"She's over! She's over!" gasped Willard as one agonized scream cut the silence and echoed from shore to shore.

"Keep up! keep up!" cried Bob. "We'll see her as soon as we make the bend,—I can hear Pickles barking. Be careful, the bottom is rocky here; keep her in the current; if we strike you'll never know what happened."

Round the bend the canoe swept, and the paddlers scanned the river's stretch for hope.

"She's safe! She's stuck on a rock! If the current don't swamp her or wash her off, she's safe if we can reach her. Now, for your life! Once more—again—steady—don't shoot beyond; the falls are not fifty yards off."

Stroke after stroke shot the little lifeboat to May's succor, shot her true and in time, for as Willard reached out and caught the stranded canoe by the nose, the rising tide, swollen by the spring rains and freshets, washed her free, and would have sent her on to her destruction. With a spring Willard was in her, and his added weight held her safely for the moment.

"Don't leave the current!" shouted Bob.

"You 'll get swamped in a trough—keep her in mid-stream and in a moment we 're safe."

The strong paddles pinned the little crafts to their turning, churning the waters to a froth, the angry, tumbling waters that seemed bound to win. But in a twinkling man's strength had won the day, and both canoes were making progress safely up stream.

After that fatal bend was reached the force was slackened, and the boys let up on their paddles for the first time. Both were pale and spent, but not so pale as a little figure that sat rigid as a statue in the prow of the red canoe, with a small yellow dog clasped in her arms.

"Thank Bob, dear," whispered Willard. "He saved you."

"Thanks!" muttered May through parched lips, mechanically holding out a trembling hand as Willard shot his canoe beside the other. "Thanks, Bob."

Bob took the unsteady hand in his, touched it lightly with his lips, and then suddenly looked straight ahead and shot his canoe round a bend.

"We 'll land; you 'll recover best to walk a bit. Action 's always a restorer. What a trump you were to stick to your post, like the boy on the burning deck. Most any other girl would have

fainted in a lifeless heap on the boat's bottom. I felt proud of you, sitting up so brave and white."

"Don't praise me," faltered May with filling eyes. "It 's like your generosity to cover up my folly, and not blame me. O Willard, Willard! when shall I ever learn to be prudent and obey orders? Supposing anything had happened to Bob in saving me, how could I ever have faced Merle!" she sobbed, in a flood of tears.

"Supposing anything had happened to you, how could I ever have faced your mother? I thought of it even then, May."

"Would it be dishonorable if I did n't tell her? There 's no harm done, and it would only terrify her. I 've got my lesson, and can be prudent for a season now."

"'Mum's' the word this time, as a reward. You fought a gallant fight, for you might have jumped overboard with fright and drowned yourself ——"

"I deserved to drown."

"But you paddled bravely, though it did no good."

"I should think I did," said May, opening out a blistered and bleeding hand.

"Poor girl! sit here on this stump and I 'll bind it up with my handkerchief," which Willard proceeded to do, kneeling before her in the bottom of the boat.

"Does it smart much?" he asked kindly, when the task was done.

"Not half so much as my conscience. I'm a black sheep, laddie. Scold just a little, please, so I can feel punished, and not so contemptible."

"If you feel burdened with indebtedness, you might pay the doctor," suggested Willard, keeping his eyes on the bandaged hand.

May glanced at the kneeling figure, feeling sobered and grateful enough to pay the price demanded. The thought that Willard had risked his life to save her from her own rashness touched her deeply; while the memory of those few moments when she had faced the agony of death made life seem very real and sweet, and the companion of many years deserving of his wish. She felt no sentimentalism; she had little of that at any time; and the impulse that prompted her surrender was girlishly sweet and serious.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed," she whispered in a husky voice; and bending forward she offered a pale, tear-stained face, willing to give and to receive.

"Here is one for each cheek and one for the dimple," said Willard softly. "Shall I take another for Bob? He was the true rescuer, you know."

"Mine would n't please in that quarter," said May

sagely. "Merle was in his mind when his lips touched my hand. He was thinking with that Persian poet (what 's his name?)—'She is not the rose, but she has dwelt with her.' Did n't you hear what he called back to me—'Don't be rash again, girlie, and spoil Merle's vacation'? Poor Bob!"

"Why sigh for that swain? 'Poor Willard!' would be more in order. But you 're not going to be a horrid old maid now, are you?"

"There came near not being any maid at all," laughed May evasively, and hastening to change the subject. "Did you hear Pickles bark?"

"Yes; bless his boots—tail, I mean. After your one scream it was the first sound that reached us, and a welcome one it was, you bet! Pickles Norton, you shall have a red collar, and be my mascot after all; for you stuck to your mistress and guarded her well, which is as much as could have been expected of a dog twice your size."

There was a pause, which May ended by saying somewhat deprecatingly, "It does n't sound a bit romantic, I know, so soon after escaping from the jaws of death, but I 'm as hungry as a bear just coming out of his hibernating den! Can't we eat here, or would it be better to paddle up-stream a piece?"

"We 'd better move along nearer the train, it gets dark so quickly," said Willard. "Wait till I fluff up the cushions and shake the carpet (we took in a little water in turning the boat). There, my mate, cuddle down; cheer up and get a little color in those cheeks, else I shall have to doctor them again."

May settled herself aimlessly, docile well-nigh to the point of imbecility; for she smiled while Willard adjusted the pillows and tucked in her skirts. In fact the usual May had been swallowed up in fright, and only her shadow remained. Marvelling that neither pillow nor paddle greeted his head in return for his gallantry, Willard made a mental memorandum of how sweet and docile a little woman May would make when she had done sowing her wild oats and had settled down for good.

"We 'll land here if you say so," he suggested, presently, "for this hill commands a view both up and down the river; and we really ought to make Bob lunch with us, for I 'm certain he has nothing—he seldom bothers the servants."

"We 'll keep our eyes open, and I 'll set aside a share for him," replied May, as the two settled themselves on a mossy log and rehearsed *the* event of the day between welcome mouthfuls.

"I 'm glad it happened, anyway!" summed up

the chief actor, "for I 've had my needed lesson, and it always takes something heroic to make an impression on me."

"What are you two idiots doing up there!" called a familiar voice, proceeding from nobody knew where. "Don't you know the 5.17 's the last train up?"

"We *are* a pair of idiots," laughed May, scrambling up pillows, sardine cans, olive and ginger ale bottles.

"It would just take an enforced night on the river to finish up this trying day. Never mind the other cushion—jump in!" commanded May, and Willard obeyed, giving the canoe a vigorous push with a leap that came near to landing him on his back in the middle.

He did his best, but his strength was gone, and his hands were sore from his previous exertions. The canoe reached the landing just in time to see Bob's legs disappear over a wall, and a trail of smoke float away in the sky.

"O Willard! Willard Jenks! What shall we do?" cried May desperately. "If Bob gets home first it will terrify mother."

"We 'll paddle down to the next station and trust to getting a train on the branch. We can telephone your mother there."

There was a train, fortunately, which was miracu-

lously caught. May boarded it with flying hair, and a medley of pillows and edibles under one arm, from which a merry little stream of sardine oil trickled noiselessly down her dress. The telephone had been overlooked in the rush, and Mrs. Norton and Roy met them at the door at dusk.

"I was getting worried, dear; try always to catch the early train. Did you have a pleasant day?" questioned Mrs. Norton, covering a mother's unspoken alarm with a thankful kiss.

Roy nearly fell down the front stoop in his eagerness to hear full particulars about this "truly" boat, for he had been beguiled at critical moments by the diplomatic May with promises that his lordship should frequently grace its expeditions.

"Such a day, mother! and I can paddle like a duck,—ask Willard."

"If you could swim like one I should feel far safer," observed the maternal bird. "Won't you come in, Willard?"

"No, thanks; I 'll let mother know I 'm safe too," replied Willard, adding to himself, as he tipped his hat and turned down the steps,—

"'Where innocence is bliss,' etc! But—speaking of ducks—if this day's work is to have many duplicates, I shall wish I had webbed hands too!"

CHAPTER XIII

A WEEK'S VACATION

While May was spending the holidays on the river, Merle was having experiences of her own. In her despondent moods she was wont to say that her road never would have a turning, and perhaps she agreed with that sweet poet philosopher who observed that, while the Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, doubtless He finds it necessary to temper the sunshine too.

Several seeds of her planting had been faithfully tended for many months, tended with wistful and hopeful eyes, but they had lain dormant, evidently barren of results. Then one never-to-be forgotten day Merle woke to find her nascent seedlings burst into being with a growth which, to her young eyes, seemed as magic as Jack's beanstalk.

On the day in question, May, ignorant of these happenings, had gone to the upper story in search of her goddess. But no goddess was anywhere visible. The tidy little sitting-room, the dining-room, the

kitchen, the blue room, and Mr. Elliot's chamber,—all bespoke a recent presence, but showed no substantial one.

May returned to the little blue chamber and stood pondering, when suddenly sounds of an indeterminate character seemed to issue from no particular spot. May peered under the bed, and then quickly crossed the room and threw open the closet door.

This closet was very large, almost a respectable room as closets go nowadays, with hooks enough to accommodate a far more substantial wardrobe than Merle ever hoped to own. At one side reposed a long cedar chest, painfully suggestive in shape to that receptacle which forms one's last resting place.

Merle entertained a very healthy horror of this coffin-like box, and nothing short of her love for Mrs. Norton, to whom it belonged, would ever have induced her to let it remain in her closet.

As May swung back the door its ominous outline was the first to defy the gloom, and as her eyes went from its sepulchral depths to the cover balanced threateningly against some dark gowns, she felt a cold chill creep up her back, and swiftly emerged into the room's daylight. Then, slowly, a long spectral form outlined itself in the depths of the cedar chest, and became tangible in two small boot-soles that stuck up from the lighted end.

"O Merle, my dear, what is the matter?" cried May, gathering her goddess in her arms.

The goddess was in a very dishevelled condition, with red eyes, rampant hair-pins, and wet cheeks. Yet her eyes sparkled behind their veil of tears, and her lips smiled for all their trembling

"O May! May! the skies have fallen!"

Down went the brown head into the chest's depths again, a light one following, which emerged later in an equally dishevelled state.

"Don't weep and smile on that old skirt! be more poetical and take refuge on my breast!" laughed May in stagey tones. "Quick! your news—the days of spontaneous combustion are not over, I 'm sure!"

"Three things have happened," said Merle breathlessly, "two regular bombs, and the third is—well, at any other time it would have been good enough, but just now it 's inopportune."

"Leave that for the last, and give me one and two," urged May, quite at a loss to account for Merle's excited condition.

"When it comes to choosing between my music and my scribbling, it 's about an even draw, but," added Merle, running an airy scale with her tapering fingers, "perhaps the music lies nearest my heart, after all."

"You said it first just now," observed May with an outward smile and an inward groan.

"True, you observant bird. Well, you know what the poet says: 'The heart cannot possibly remain neutral, but constantly takes part one way or the other.' I found that in the dictionary under 'neutral,' and bagged it,—it may be useful to me later on."

The quotation left Merle in a reverie, for she paused, looking seemingly into the far future,—a veil her gray eyes pierced with pleasure. May watched the smile grow on her lips, and longed to know what web her fancy wove to make the little heart against which she leaned flutter and throb with excitement.

"Come back, come back to earth, my dear, or share your flight with me."

"Oh, May, effort does pay! Do you remember Miss Weston, an aunt or cousin of Bob's, who spent a week with them not long ago?"

"The one who called on mother?"

"Yes. To-day she called on me. The sitting-room was spick and span, thank fortune! You have to be so particular, May, where callers are liable to drop in any minute. She was dressed so lovely in fur, and I felt so proud at such a stylish visitor, and she was so sweet with her offer, I really

felt as if I were taking a load off her shoulders in accepting it. You see, she registered at the Conservatory in the mid-term for piano lessons with one of its most expensive teachers, and paid her tuition in advance. Then, of course, she was taken ill, and has never felt able to put the effort into it until now, and her doctor thinks she would better go abroad. They don't refund money there, but they allowed her to transfer it. She said she had cudgelled her brains to think who would put enough effort into the work to please her, and then suddenly she thought of me. She recalled how 'diligently and earnestly' (them 's her words, not mine) I had practised that week she visited here; so she put her things right on and came. Oh, I wonder if I ever shall be rich enough to go round beautifully dressed, handing over food for the gods to poor girls. I don't know how she managed it,—I 'm so proud,—but I felt the tears fill my eyes, and then she got up and kissed me. 'When I get back from abroad next year,' she said, 'I shall have to hear your progress.' It 's mine, May, six months with the best of teachers! Do you wonder that I feel as if the skies had fallen?"

"Dear honey bee, won't you sip nectar from this sweet flower? I 'm so glad, so glad!" exclaimed generous-hearted May. "Does Bob know of it?"

"Oh, no,—that is, she did n't say so, but I inferred as much. Of course she 'd know how distasteful that would be."

"Of course," admitted May with more than usual tact; then after an introspective pause she brought her soliloquies to a head by a saying that had done service before, only this time it was unspoken: "I wonder why owls are all eyes, and bats have none?"

"I sha'n't leave you any time to thrill, my dear, for fortune has lifted her cap twice, you know. This can't be so great a surprise, because you know I scribble. It 's different than, though——

"You must n't say 'than' after 'different.' I stumbled on that somewhere, Merle," corrected May sagely. "A thing differs *from*."

"I 'm so glad you told me, dear. It 's very necessary to know just such things; it 's ammunition for my profession," said the literary swallow of one summer, whipping out a tiny memorandum book, from which a bird's-egg-blue and gilt-tipped pencil depended. "In writing you must have grammar at your finger-ends, May. Listen to my notes:

"'"Each" means two.

"'"One another" means three.

"'Never say "off of"; "off" is enough.

"'Don't use a preposition to end a sentence with (?).'

"Then the subjunctive! The subjunctive is something fierce, May. It 's the wrong of the right. It 's like some dress goods that you never can tell the right from the wrong side of till it 's made up. First, you must n't say 'I be' or 'she be,' and then you must. Don't you know that old poet says:

"'What care I how fair she be,
If she be not fair for me'?"

But May did not know that, or anything else at that moment; for as Merle happened to give an upward thrust of her arms in the energy of her exposition, the cover of the cedar chest, the good behavior of which had been conditional on her stationary position, lost its balance, and, descending with more rapidity and force than seemed called for, sandwiched the girls between itself and the rim upon which it normally rested.

"I hate that thing,—it will be the death of me yet!" growled Merle, wriggling out after the stars had cleared from her vision. "I must get some vinegar and brown paper, we don't want to look as if we 'd been in a prize fight—this week least of all."

"I 'll forget the bumps best if you 'll go on," said May, recovering. "It was the subjunctive mood you were at."

"If I 'be' such a goose as to go near that thing again, I deserve to have my vertebræ dislocated!"

laughed Merle. "Well, you see, I can't tell it half so well with all the wits knocked out of me, but perhaps you recall that story I wrote last fall—'Ruby's Romance'? There's a name for that when you get both letters alike, 'alliteration.' Well, I determined to try its luck; so I began with the *Atlantic Monthly* and worked down the list. I had nice, civil letters from every one; printed letters, which shows there are a great many who get left. 'Dear Madam,'—didn't that sound rich? and they went on to say it wasn't my fault that they returned it; they are short of room often; the advertisements *do* take up a great deal of space (you and I have noticed that); and they said oftentimes others accepted what they didn't. So I just kept hopeful—though the stamps I used did count up—and finally, to-day, it was accepted! Oh May, think of me in print! It's a small paper and they don't pay anything, but they gave me six months' subscription free. I didn't care for that, but I shall let them do it just to waste their stamps, when they're too mean to give me a dollar or two. But, May, it means I've put my foot on the first rung of the ladder, and it will be easy climbing now," cried Young Hope with a brown-paper diadem on her gifted brow. "How shall I sign myself, Merle Elliot, or Merle Royce Elliot?"

"Merle Elliot sounds best; then when you get married it won't make it too long. Merle Elliot—well, 'White,' for instance, would sound better than Merle Royce Elliot White," observed the owl.

"Figs for your marrying! I'm a Mormon now, with a pen and a piano for husbands. I think the last thing I wrote was what took the editor. It's queer, May, but literary people are often inspired at night. I was, and wrote it on the headboard under the rose design. It doesn't show much—it happened to strike a leaf. I think the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* must have been written there,—on *her* headboard of course,—and most of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It's queer," mused Merle, tasting even then—what literary owls of longer moult have learned to dread and discount—this wide-eyed midnight vision, when the tired brain awakens and persists in fancy's weaving.

"Won't it sound grand,—'Merle Elliot, author of *Ruby's Romance*,'—when you come to send the next story?" said May. "I knew you had ability—it wasn't just a diseased fancy of mine that kept my blood curdling when you told ghost stories on the stairs. Where shall you send the next?"

"Not to them, you may be sure They'll never get another word of mine; and when I'm famous they'll wish they'd had a little more honor in the

start. Why they kept even the stamps I sent for its return!"

"What 's number three in the surprise line?"

"Ah, that 's the thorn among the roses, the bitter with the sweet. But I shall go. You see Della has invited me to spend the holidays with her at college. It 's a very kind letter, quite unlike her, and I felt perhaps she meant we should get along better hereafter. She 's been brought under different influences this year, and so have I, and I hope we shall grow to think more of each other. I 'm going to try to be less impetuous and impatient with her rule when she comes home this summer; and it seems as if I ought to be able to remember that for at least three months of the year I 'm *not* 'Miss Elliot.' I could n't bear to think of going when I first opened the letter, for I had a sort of feeling—doubtless my own hateful suspicions—that she had invited Miss Stein first, and that she could n't come. But I had a talk with your mother, and she said 'Go.' She 's always right, so I shall go, though it 's hard when so much is in the air this week."

May's first impulse, to ignore duty and urge her goddess not to spoil her week's vacation and that of others, died on her lips. She was learning, too, in her own impulsive way, to look higher than her own pleasure; for she suddenly sobered and sat quietly

stroking the soft little hand that rested in her lap, feeling, perhaps with another, that no guide could prove more humanly sweet and sure than the fair young mentor by her side.

Visits which necessitated the purchase of a ticket beforehand and the packing of a trunk were not so frequent that they could be met without excitement by these simple people in their quiet lives, and the few hours which intervened between Merle's decision and her start were filled almost to bursting.

May offered everything in her possession to augment the simple wardrobe; Mrs. Norton did up the one white lawn with a sure and practised hand, and took many loving stitches in the neat little nothings; while Roy, not to be outdone in friendly offerings, carried up his baby chain and locket, and a dime watch that "truly went." Merle clasped the locket round her neck, and tucked the watch in her belt, to which she made frequent reference in the process of packing. It was the secret of her success with children,—to meet them freely on their own ground, and never to repulse a generous act or impulse.

The trunk succeeded in getting its lid closed after many abortive attempts, and May danced the can-can on its cover, to assist in the easier working of

the lock. The fat expressman shouldered it and went bumping down the front stairs, swearing the air blue in return for Mrs. Norton's vigilance, as she guarded him from the walls, the gas globe, the banister rails, and her new oilcloth treadings.

Roy thirsted to lend a helpful hand, and spent the remainder of the day in fierce experiments with a doll's trunk, a relic of May's girlhood. He hoisted it with groans, shouldered it with expletives, and drove reckless miles in his express-cart in pursuit of a flying train.

Merle said "Good-by" and went tripping down the steps with a motherly embrace from Mrs. Norton, several bear-hugs from May, and Roy's baby kisses still wet upon her face.

She was alone, but with happy plans enough in mind to beguile a far longer journey than that in hand. She checked her trunk with a business-like air, feeling that it was timely practice for one who might soon be called upon to manage copyrights and all the numerous details connected with authorship, and composed herself in the dingy car, not without solicitous help from the conductor, who smiled blandly into her pretty face and upset her and her bundles with his familiar "boost."

"Excuse me; I 'm looking for a young lady what answers to this name," informed the colored porter,

presenting Merle with her own card. "If that's yer name, please follow."

"What next!" muttered Merle, as the porter gathered her bag and bundles together and bowed as if to a queen.

Through the door, over the car's coupling, through another door, on, on, Merle sped after her dusky guide, and finally sank into a commodious revolving chair in the parlor car.

"I'm to look out for your comfort, missis, my directions is. Will you have your water iced or plain? and shall I raise the shade higher?"

"It's all right, thanks; I'll ring if I wish for anything," vouchsafed Merle in a condescending tone, hoping thereby to disguise the fact that this was the first time her aristocratic feet had ever passed the threshold of a parlor car.

The latest *Atlantic* and *Harper* rested on her lap, for the porter had lifted them from the chair and handed them to her. Merle opened at random, not with intent of reading, but merely as a focus for her eyes. But a whiff of perfume brought her glance to the window-sill, and there it encountered a magnificent bunch of violets and a box of her well-beloved Huyler's.

Merle lifted the violets to her face and held them there. And if her eyes filled, who shall say whether

it was from pain or pleasure or tender trust? A small card nestled in their midst, but what need of that? Who but her Bob ever ministered with such gracious tact?

If the journey was long Merle never knew it. It seemed but a moment before the porter again swept off with her things, and glancing amazedly out she saw Della in waiting.

Roy had a busy week in his office as postman, for scarcely a day went by that a gray uniform was not seen laboring up the front stoop. He called next door too, the wearer of the gray uniform, at least three times in the course of that week, and left a snow-white scented envelope, addressed "Mr. Robert White," and postmarked Northampton.

Though such a reserved little body, even her week's vacation failed to awaken Merle from her intoxication of success and hope. Della was not altogether a satisfactory confidante; May was too impetuous and too young fully to understand the magnitude of her ambitions; but Bob not only could, but would, take pride in her success and live in her hope.

Perhaps it was his last generous act that enticed Merle out of her reserve; or it may have been the dynamic happenings in her own small world that made her long to shout the glad tidings from the housetops. Such a sweet confidence as it was,—the

girlish hope to reach up, up, and shape her future as easily in her hand as if she had but to pluck the ripened fruit and carry its nectar to her lips.

They were well worth their price, those three little letters, if they cost their author any effort; for they were read and re-read with thirsty yearning, each word balanced and none found wanting, and the recipient read something in their girlish trust and endeavor that quickened his pulse and squared his shoulders and made his step the firmer.

CHAPTER XIV

LETTERS

(Merle to May)

Northampton, Mass.

Dear May:

In keeping with my promise I write at once to acquaint you with my safe arrival. Della met me and seemed unnaturally pleasant. She has improved. Being with such nice girls could n't help influencing her, I think. She had ruching in her sleeves and neck, and she does n't bite her nails so badly. Also she has let down her serge skirt and covered up the crease with braid, which heightens her considerably when I 'm not by, then my chin is on a level with her ears.

Every one has been very kind to me, though of course many are away. I like Della's room-mate,—a sweet, sensible girl, who plays divinely. My finger-tips itched to touch the baby-grand here, but I could n't bring myself to speak about it to Della,

nor of Miss Weston's gift either. Della is n't so excitable as I am, and the story in —— did n't please her much. She said it would be best to just sign my initials, as the magazine was n't any great credit to one. Also I 'd better not scribble any more and interfere with my studies, on account of graduating. But she did n't intimate that doing the housework would interfere any! I always feel so young and stupid alongside of Della! She has such a faculty of taking the starch out of one; and then she knows such a heap, and knows she knows it!

Let me whisper it. She *did* invite Miss Stein, and she could n't come, so I was an after-thought. But I 'm not going to let that matter. I did right to come, and I shall do my best to be pleased, though I can't help thinking of you dear ones, and longing to be back.

If they should send the proof sheets, you 'd better wire me, as I should n't like to keep the magazine waiting.

What larks you must be having!

Love to all, and a kiss for Roy,

MERLE.

(May to Merle)

Roxbury, Mass.

MY DARLING MERLE:

I just devoured your letter, I was so hungry to hear. You must write every blessed day.

Oh, Merle, there came near being a tragedy on the river, and I the heroine, which will be the only way I shall ever get into print, I guess! It was too terrible for words, and I shall reserve it for telling. Only "mum's" the word, remember! I take that reward as a reminder for future prudence.

Such larks! wait till summer, and if all moves well we 'll have the time of our lives. That 's a secret too, but I keep having the chills up my spine every time I think of it, which is pretty much all day.

Bob's canoe is "out of sight"—a regular daisy; and the girls are falling over each other in their attentions to its owner. He is simply stunning in his pink and blue shirts; and, as Miss Shaw remarked, "He 's handsome enough to make drowning with him a pleasure."

Frank took Blanche out last week, and she has n't recovered yet, and she 's bought a Japanese sunshade to be in readiness for the next trip; which I hope, for her sake, will take place before your return.

Please excuse the blots,—Waffles and Sally Lunn are responsible for them. One is on my neck chewing my ear, and the other has got lost under my skirts.

Mother got a very encouraging letter from Grace this week, and is so happy that she keeps wandering round the new room and planning all sorts of things.

They—Grace and Will—have come as far north as Philadelphia, but Will intimates that he is liable to get an appointment to the West any day, and he does n't mind keeping away from Boston's spring, which seems to have a bad name, though it suits me. "Tell Merle sister is in Filfidelfia," Roy importunes. (Is n't that last rich? I mean "importunes.")

Oh, my dear, come back! Could n't you come just one day sooner and pay your social debts here? There 's so much to tell! but I want to reserve it for your "trembling ears." That 's in *Lycidas*, my dear. Shall I not bag a few literary ducks for your consumption? I did n't understand how it is used there,—Milton bungles so with words. Don't you know those mirthful lines where he says,—

"Trip it lightly as ye go,
On the light fantastic toe"?

Now, Merle, seriously, between you and me, can you swallow "toe" in poetry? And what does "fantastic toe" mean?

A duck's foot is webbed, a satyr is "cloven" in poetry, hoofed in plain English. I cannot think of any "fantastic toe" in all literature, can you? When it comes down to plain human nature, you would have to put on red stockings and high-heeled slippers to make it fantastic, and then you no longer

have "toe," but foot. Is n't "toe" the concrete of foot? Tabby has been explaining "concrete," and she said it was "a part as distinguished from the whole."

But to go back to *Lycidas* and the "trembling ears." I saw at once it could be used with effect. If you were describing a donkey, for instance, his ears are so large any one could see their trembling at a glance—especially in fly time; and it would still leave something for the reader's imagination, which rhetoric advises; for the fact is, as you might say, patent; and just that one word would paint your picture with what they call, I think, a bold, free, brush. (I don't like brush there, but after saying "paint" I have to carry out the consistency, but you can supply "pencil" in your mind's eye, or "pen" if you prefer ink.)

I find I am better in English than I thought. If I still improve we might write the next story together. Famous authors do, and there 's a word that means it, but I can't think—oh, yes! it 's "collaboration"; we 'll collaborate, if you like. Or if you would rather, I might illustrate. I can draw whales and lobsters to perfection. Ha! Ha!

I can't think of any more, so good-by, sweetheart; here 's a kiss, and these OOOOOO are from Roy.

Yours in constancy,

May.

(Mrs. Norton to Merle)

Roxbury, Mass.

My Dear Girl:

I was so pleased to get your neat, correct little letter, which seemed to me typical of its author. Never mind, my dear, if you did accidentally find out that I wrote and suggested that your sister should invite you to Northampton. Be so pleasant and amenable that she can't possibly regret what perhaps cost her an effort too.

I am sure you deserve all the happiness that has come to you, for of late I have had to wipe my spectacles very clear to find any tares among my wheat. Dear, ambitious little maid! keep on endeavoring, and by and by I shall have to wipe them more often still to clear them from the misty pride that will gather in my eyes because of your success.

There must be something sweet and good about a little body whom every one misses. Your father seems quite lost and aimless, and does n't like my toast so well as yours, and was quite frank in saying so. He has filed a lot of clippings to read on your return, and several vital questions for your decision, which shows how beautifully necessary you are growing to be to him. Take pleasure in your well-doing, my dear. Jean Ingelow says: "Joy is the grace we say to God."

I have a surprise for you in more material matters. I found a love of a dotted muslin at a bargain, and bought it for your graduation frock. If you don't like it, it can be turned over to May. You can pay for it as slowly as you please; and it will save your being worried about it. I shall help in the making of it as my gift to you. Don't you think three rows of lace insertion in the skirt, and a sort of surplice waist, low at the throat, would be dainty?

Rest from everything you have been doing and thinking, and come home refreshed and glad to take up your duties again.

Remember me to Miss Elliot.

Yours with love,

JEAN NORTON.

(Bob to Merle)

Cambridge, Mass.

DEAR MERLE:

Thanks for that last letter. It was so dear it almost paid for your running off like a pious little nun in a gray cloak of duty.

You only speak of your plans, and not of your doings. Are you having a good time, *ma chère?*

I was afraid you were not, and so I wrote to my cousin, Mr. William White of Amherst, to present his card and do the honors by you. He is a nice

fellow, but you will remember his attentions are mine by proxy, will you not?

Now confidence begets confidence, so I am going to whisper something in your ear. Did you know what the night we went to the opera meant to me? I kept it quiet then for state reasons, but you will hear of it in time and misjudge me if I don't "'fess." In short I was twenty-one—a gentleman "growd." In other words I have a bankbook now, and am doing my best to reduce its figures. To speak plainer, I am studying finances in the world's market. I have bought a piece of land and am about to build on it. Perhaps you recall my real-estate fever last winter, and see that there was "method in my madness." I intend to rent it to some capable woman or couple who will run it for a clique of us fellows, about fifteen in all. Willard and I have agreed it would be easier to live in Cambridge another year; and you know "distance lends enchantment." I imagine Miranda will not be so cruel to her Ferdinand as to shut herself up in her cave (as she frequently does now) when he has to travel miles to see her.

I enclose a facsimile of the plans. Do you think it is too cut up with bays? Yet, if I remember, you are fond of sunny rooms. Won't it be "larks" finishing it, and furnishing my own rooms? Will

you help with the wall paper, and be free with your valued advice?

Have a good time, and come home ready for more. I suppose we 'll all have to shut ourselves up till the finals are over, and one "sweet girl graduate" bows over her diploma, then we'll toss up our caps and make Rome howl. The river bids fair to furnish all it promised, though May got a sobering the first day, and came very near furnishing the undertaker with a trio of subjects for his art. Did she tell?

No, I don't believe in capital punishment; and I can see the point of your free-trade policy. You 'll make a politician of me yet, my—excuse me, a slip of the pen, my—excuse me again.

I have been up to the Bendonsas' twice, as you asked, and found all the domestic machinery running smoothly. How they love you, my mentor! Mrs. B. actually crossed herself when I spoke your name, and then smiled and said she did n't know but living saints did more for us nowadays than dead ones. Wise woman! I believe in living saints too, and one I worship.

Let me know of your return train. Remember! that is my payment for missing the pleasure of seeing you aboard when you started.

Yours ever,

Bob.

(Merle to May)

Northampton, Mass.

Dearest May:

Things have turned out better than they promised, and I have had several jolly days, and one surprise.

You see, many of the girls in Della's house (which is a little community in itself, for Freshmen never get on the Campus) remained here through the vacation, and the teacher in charge kindly planned several pleasures for them.

One was a dance. I did n't anticipate much, as Della knows no young men, and I could n't dance with her. But I put on my mull, and dressed my hair low in the Psyche knot you like and Della does n't, outside of statuary. But the dull time did n't materialize, for one of the girls has taken me up. In other words she seems to like me, and she brought up a bunch of Amhersts for introductions. Nice fellows! Then I saw a young man looking intently at me. His face seemed just familiar enough to disconcert me, and while I was trying to place him, he asked Miss Farrer for an introduction. "Miss Elliot, Mr. White"; and then suddenly he held out his hand—which is n't proper, May; remember, a woman always makes the advances.

"Why! is this *the* Miss Elliot!" he exclaimed, and I shook in my boots for fear of Della. Then

it all cleared up. He is Bob's cousin, and looks like him, only there is something lacking in his face that Bob has. (You need n't go and repeat that now—mind!)

Well, I was n't any wall flower that night, be sure, nor the next day either, for he invited us to drive, and was so lovely to Della that she thawed and went. Mt. Tom and Mt. Hadley are so picturesque, May, and the bridge with the Connecticut flowing under, and then the meadows,—Oh! there 's something in the air this spring that keeps me fairly drunk with joy.

Then he asked us to row on the lake or river,—Paradise they call it,—but Della had an engagement with one of the professors which left me alone, and so I greeted gladly this opportunity not to be alone. But I felt the temperature fall at once, in Della's air, though I said nothing, feeling that I was getting too old to have any apron strings visible.

I expected Della would say something when we were alone; and if so I could send him a note of regret. But she did n't mention it—and so did n't I.

I had a fine time, imagining Paradise was the Charles River, and he, Mr. White, was Bob, and you and Willard were with me in ghost form. But, when I returned,—my dear! Speaking of curtain lectures,

Mrs. Caudle was n't in it! D. laid me right out, just like old times. I wanted to flare up and pack my trunk, but I remembered my resolve; and, May dear, it 's surprising how easy it is to be calm if you once try it. So it blew over, and Mr. White is relieved of the burden of entertaining me; though it seemed insulting when Bob had asked him to do it. The fact is, Della does not like young men, and to her a girl who comes much under their influence loses something—I don't know what—but something, clearly.

Does Willard's and Bob's kindness and thoughtfulness work your downfall, my dear? Could you "cross them off the list, and say they never will be missed"? Dear me, I don't pose for a flirt, but I confess I should miss the boys. (You need n't repeat that either.)

Do you realize how few weeks remain of school, and do the final exams make faces at you? The Glee Club here sing the following "pome," which you might do well to take to heart:

"They said she must not worry
Nor sit up late to cram,
Nor have a sense of hurry
In writing her exam.

And so she did *not* worry
Nor sit up late to cram,

Nor have a sense of hurry,—
And she flunked in her exam!"

Only two days more, my dear, so cheer up, and have the corncake hot.

Love,
MERLE.

(May to Merle)

Roxbury, Mass.

MOST GRACIOUS GODDESS:

Though I run the risk of this crossing you on the way, I can't keep from writing.

My dear, as I was posting your last letter at the corner, I turned hurriedly and ran plunk into Captain White. I nearly knocked him flat, but I darted on too frightened to apologize. Then he grabbed me by the shoulder and said in a gruff voice, but with a twinkle in his eye,—

"Is this my neighbor?"

"No neighbor, sir," says I, "but your next-door resident."

Then he laughed (you 'd worship his teeth, Merle; just a wilderness of gold!) and said:

"I guess I deserve that, you pert one. But you are not the proud one with the gray eyes?" (When, please, did you give him the pleasure of determining their color?)

"My eyes are green, sir, by nature, blue only by the courtesy of my friends," says I. Then he chucked me under the chin with his gold-headed cane, and said:

"I understand now some of the attraction next door. Very good, my girl. Run over some time, and bring the gray-eyed one with you."

Watch them crawl out of their shells, now you're beginning to be famous, Merle. I hope you'll sit on them, every one, and not let them "taffy" you!

Yesterday there was a crowd of us on the river. Blanche tries to be funny sometimes, and usually at my expense. She thinks I'm an ignoramus and she likes to show me up to the boys. Willard says she makes him "tired." I was talking, and I ended by saying if I got plucked in exams, geometry would be my Waterloo.

"Waterloo," says she, "what's that?"

"Water—water," says I, acting flustered. "Oh, yes, it's a river in France where a famous general, Napoleon, I believe, was drowned."

And she swallowed it all, and nearly upset the canoe laughing, and the boys all joined in after giving me the wink. What a puppy she is, and have you ever noticed what mammoth feet she has? They show up dreadfully in a canoe, though she sits

on them or keeps them under the cushions for the most part.

The last day before vacation, Sir Tom called on her to recite the duties of a Justice of the Peace. She was n't prepared, for he had been calling on the girls alphabetically for the last few weeks, and he was n't anywhere near her initial. But she thinks he began at the wrong end of the pack. She was eating cardamom seeds at the time, which added to her confusion.

"He,—the Justice of the Peace," she stammered, "has the right to marry."

"Naturally," said Sir Tom; and the girls snickered. She saw the point, and added, more flustered still:

"That is—I mean—he has the right to marry some one else," and then the girls shouted; and after Sir Tom recovered he gave us a lesson in equivocal English, which used up the rest of the hour and saved Blanche's bacon.

I have found bloodroot and saxifrage in the fields, but I have saved them for you to pick, my darling. Oh, what with this spring weather, and the thought of your return and a pickled lime or two, I could write poetry!

Once upon a time,
Not very far behind,

Lived a goddess fair,
With locks of chestnut hair.

There, now! that just dripped off my pen point, without any thought. I can see now what you mean by inspiration; it 's just as though you did n't do it yourself at all, only waked up in time to judge it.

If we should "elaborate"—no, "collaborate"—together, I might do the poetry part, and you the prose. Or if I illustrate, how would I do the eyes in *Ruby's Romance?* You say,—"Mercurial light burned in her azure eyes."

I have drawn and painted whole sheets of eyes; I can get the azure, but the mercury in the old porch thermometer is different I can't blend the two—mercury runs into shot; it covers everything; my ring is no longer gold. You will have to change that line. On sober second thought, you can see her eyes could not be mercury color and blue at once. Oh, how you have to balance things in literature!

I must n't write another word, for I only have one stamp, and my month's allowance has run out.

Oh, I am so hungry for the sight of you! Do take an early train.

Love by the bushel,

MAY.

CHAPTER XV

LILAC BUSHES

"'A straight line is the shortest distance between two points. A straight line is the shortest distance between two points. A straight line is the shortest distance between two points.' The more I say that, the less sense there is in it."

"If you say it once again, May, there 'll be no sense left in me," complained Merle. "Move along nearer the poplar. If we 're to study together on the roof, you 've got to contribute your share of quiet."

"When Sir Oracle opes his lips, let no man speak! Shakespeare. Most reverend goddess, allow me to invoke your aid. See, from this catkin *a* to this caterpillar *b*, how can it be anything but a straight line?"

"It could be a broken line, could n't it, or a curve?"

"A broken line, or a curve," repeated May reflectively. "But a broken line is more than one line,

and a curve is n't a straight line at all! Supposing Miss Lloyd said, 'Miss Norton, step to the board and draw me a straight line from *a* to *b*' and I should chalk a curve, what do you think she would say?"

"In all probability she would inquire what you had for breakfast, if strong coffee figured in the bill of fare. But don't try to understand things; that is n't expected. Just learn them enough to squeak through, and next year in solid geometry you can dismiss all that bug dust. I never shall get these history dates in my head. They 're like a Jack-in-the-box, the harder I pack them in, the stronger they are to fly out. Do you remember whether the Spanish Armada comes before or after the reign of Henry VIII?"

"Henry VIII. Let me think. It must come after, Merle, because there 's a great deal of history about his wives, and after the Spanish Armada every one about was drowned and there was n't any history for quite a breathing spell. Besides was n't he the king who said, 'After us the deluge'?"

"I 'm not talking about Louis Fifteenth and the French Revolution. You 're only a couple of centuries off."

"Don't waste your breath asking me questions in anything, least of all history. I never shall know

anything about it till I get out of school. If we could study it 'by and large'—that's a new phrase, Merle,—make a note of it. Edward Everett Hale uses it, and though I never saw any sense in it before, you can see how applicable it is to the matter in hand. If, as I was saying, we could study history 'by and large' (with a spy-glass, for instance, that would search out only large facts, and not spend so much time with microscopes that by the time we have dissected parts we entirely lose sight of the whole), then I think I should love history. Cause and effect—cause and effect, you know."

"That won't come till the millennium, my dear. We shall have to cram like any Strasburg goose, and rely on the strength of our interior to digest the compound. The trouble with us is, we try to know too much. We don't have time to label and shelve things; we just toss them into our closet of brains, and trust to luck to their finding lodgment on a shelf or a hook to hang on."

"Most of mine fall to the floor and get trodden out of shape. The floor of my brain, my dear, is a mosaic of fearful and wonderful design. Historical dates and chemical symbols lap over each other, or get wedged against the hypothenuse of a right-angle triangle. What does n't fall to the floor usually gets lodged on the top shelf, but that 's too high to

reach without a long ladder of reflection. There are just two historical facts within easy reach, and they are glued to the shelves. One is the sale of Indulgences, and the other is the massacre of St. Batholomew. They stick there because of the fracas we had with the Roman Catholics not long ago,—the law of association, you see."

"Would n't it be lovely if we did n't have to waste time learning things we don't like?" observed Merle, flecking off a fuzzy caterpillar which looked like an animated catkin. "Supposing all the birds had to go to one school and learn to build their nests by precept. Supposing the oriole had to leave 'his pendent bed and procreant cradle,' and build in a brush heap, and the song sparrow was shooed out of his beloved underbrush and given nervous prostration by trying to find safety in a tree-top. We girls can't all be alike, yet we are all put through the same mill, and come out bottled and labelled like green olives. Some of us get so crushed in the packing process that it takes years to woo back our originality, and some of us lose it for good. Mercy! I never shall learn these chemical symbols, they 're so arbitrary. Do you remember the reaction for $H_2SO + KOH$?"

"I know the reaction of studying chemistry only

too well. Don't I always have a splitting headache Tuesdays and Fridays? Mother says she never knew the holes in bread were carbonic acid gas bubbles; but she could make a loaf fit for the queen when she was n't so old as I am by many moons."

"Well, my dear, let 's go back to our cramming, and take courage with the thought that after the exams we can bait our hooks and fish to our liking for several weeks to come."

Merle hitched along the shed roof, turned her back to her companion, and, stuffing her fingers in her ears, bent over an open volume in her lap. Now and then her eyes involuntarily wandered to the lilac bush, glanced over its fragrant top, and rested on the velvet lawn of the Whites' grounds, sprinkled with honest dandelions that reared their golden disks and flashed back the sun's dazzle. No word was spoken, for the furtive glance Merle now and then stole at May showed that she was in the depths of studious endeavor. Such unbroken calm was portentous and bewitched Merle's eyes into frequent watchfulness. May's face was flushed, and she worked over something with great energy of purpose. In one of her questioning glances their eyes met, but no light of recognition answered Merle's.

"'Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the dark earth

hide thee! Thou hast no speculation in those eyes that thou dost glare with!'" finally quoted Merle in a sepulchral tone.

May awoke from her trance, hastily added a few words to the work in hand, cleared her throat, and avoiding the gray eyes, said in an equivocal tone,—

"My dear, do you remember Holmes' 'Latter Day Warnings'? The poem begins—

"'When legislators keep the law,
When banks dispense with bolts and locks,
When berries—whortle, rasp, and straw—
Grow bigger downwards through the box.'"

"I ought to remember it, seeing I recited it at our literary club."

"Your remark about the millennium tempted me to a little improvisation—listen:

"When Tommy gives up teaching law,
And Blackey folds her lobster wing,
When teachers swear off picking flaws,
And now and then your praises sing;

When histories wipe out their dates,
And French verbs conjugate alike;
When no one re-ca-pit-u-lates—
And muddles up what you had right;

When sandwiches and cream-puffs light
  Shall bring their merit to the proof,
Without a lie for every bite,
  Since nothing's underneath their roof;

When classmates bound with secret's seal
  Don't sell their friendship for a price;
When all regard the concrete weal
  And monkey not with loaded dice;

When spectres grim unsnare their net,
  When printed tests surprise no drills;
When questions never answered yet
  Affect no backs with thrilly chills;

When pupils love to do just right,
  When lessons are an endless joy;
When lobsters never melt from sight,
  And chlorine whales no more decoy;

Till then must Norton blaze away,
  And studious saints revolve the globe.
But when *I* see that blessed day—
  Then—order my ascension robe!"

Perhaps some weary passer-by smiled infectiously as gales of merry girlish laughter issued from behind the group of lilac bushes. It seemed as much a part of nature's joyousness as the many other sweet sounds that filled the morning air. A robin

warbled ecstatically, baring his crimson breast to the sun's dazzle as he tilted on the tip-top pinnacle of a feathery elm; a nuthatch, hungering for his breakfast, rapped stormily at the door of some frightened ant; a hummingbird, gorgeous in his iridescent beauty, poised a moment, and then fanned himself into a pollened chalice; a cricket rasped his fiddle in a belated love ditty, and must have been very far gone indeed since he could not tell night from day; or was vying in the impetuosity of his love-making with the winged katydid who said such "an undisputed thing in such a solemn way"?

But over and above these sylvan sounds came the merry bursts of laughter that tempted one to brave the lilac's screening and to peep beyond. There, two long figures stretched at full length on the shed roof were discerned. A mass of light hair at one end evidently bore some relation to a pair of feet that kicked in an ecstasy of mirth over the water-spout, but the face of this figure was hidden beneath an open book. The other form, topped with a mass of chestnut hair, at present was doing her best to swallow a handkerchief, and to judge from the color of one visible cheek, was succeeding admirably.

Study, after this hilarious interlude, was out of the question; which the books evidently divined, for

most of them had taken themselves off down the slant roof, and at present were recuperating under the bushes.

"Oh, May!" hiccoughed Merle, blowing her nose, wiping her eyes, and in general settling her ruffled person, "oh, May! if you 'd spent half the time on your lessons that you do in cutting up these monkey shines, you 'd be a brilliant scholar."

"My dear, if the north wind should become southerly, we 'd have violets in January. I never could do things to order; I have to 'gang my ain gait.' When the English teacher says, 'Miss Norton, was Jessica justified in her flight from the Jew, her father?' my brain closes like a clam-shell. If it opens at all, it works mechanically like those katydids' wings. It says,—

"'Jessica was—

"'Jessica was n't—

"'Jessica was—

"'Jessica was n't—'

Then, if by any hook or crook it gets further, it says, 'Would Miss Norton be justified in her flight from Baxter, the bore?' But, dear goddess, let us leave our pedagogic philosophy for the nonce, and do you set your Delphian oracle in order, and I will listen to its mutterings. Propose some lark, for I 'm getting so full of bottled-up spirits, if some one

does n't uncork me, there 'll certainly be an explosion."

"I was just thinking," said Merle, "I 'd like to get some of those lilacs over in the Patch to help decorate for visitors' day. Bob would give me some of these, but he 's always giving, and I hate to ask."

"You don't mean that handsome clump over by the ruined cellar, past the graveyard?"

"Yes, some call it Brick Bottom. It 's an old ruined estate, so I don't think it would be called stealing."

"But it 's haunted—you certainly know that? There was a murder in the house, and the property fell into decline and has lain idle for years. It 's handy to the graveyard too, which accounts for the rumor keeping alive."

"You and I are too advanced in our studies to believe in ghouls, I hope; but since you 're thirsting for adventure a ghost or two might add a thrill to the occasion."

May chewed contemplatively on a piece of lovage, chalking a flying ghost on the shed roof while she balanced the possibilities of the adventure. It evidently offered something not down on the programme, for she turned an involuntary chuckle into a sneeze, and observed with a listless air:

"I read to the blind boy to-night, but Willard will

call for me, and for lack of something better, we might meet at the graveyard entrance about a quarter past eight, and pass through to get your lilacs."

It was Saturday, and Merle spent her afternoon in hard work to equalize the morning's waste, and after an early tea slipped down to the parlor to gain an hour or two at her beloved practising. She had not seen May since morning, but just before starting on her errand of mercy, May thrust in her head to give an admonitory reminder of the evening's programme, and to inquire if Merle's escort was engaged and her plans perfected.

"Yes, I saw Bob in his yard and called over to him. He said he'd go and take a basket for the lilacs. Carry a wrap, May, the evening may be chilly."

May assured her goddess that she was well supplied with wraps, and with a mischievous grin which might have enlightened one less absorbed, she closed the door, winked through the keyhole, and betook herself off.

Merle returned to her practising and wrestled with a stormy passage to such effect that no step was heard on the porch, no tinkling of the bell, no knowledge of any near presence, till the door opened again and Bob stepped in.

"Bravo! you do that mighty well, Merle."

"You 've been eavesdropping, sir!"

"Don't rise! let 's try it together. You said the other night you were n't ready, but you can't make that excuse now, and it helps in a duet to put the parts together."

Merle demurred to no purpose. Soon the four hands flowed rhythmically over the sentient keys. Here and there the soft whisperings of the treble were answered sonorously by the bass, and then both blended in one harmonious whole. Up and down the keyboard the hands passed, crossed and recrossed, questioned and answered, till the theme lost itself in a subtle modulation, melting into a minor chord that floated in a whisper through the room. Merle clasped her hands across her breast, and turned an ecstatic face, a true St. Cecilia face, toward her companion. Her lips were parted, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were full of a strange light, as if she looked over and beyond the figure at her side.

An indescribable wave of feeling swept over Bob, and his eyes sought Merle's and held their glance. It was only an instant—but the instant was dynamic. In the gray eyes was questioning surprise, as if they had suddenly viewed a new Tree of Knowledge and would fain know something of its fruit; in the brown eyes was written one word—one little word—old, yet ever sweetly new.

Merle woke first, and rose with an abruptness that left the piano stool in a dizzy swirl, saying,—

"My conscience! it 's past eight,—why did n't we keep track of the time!"

A brisk walk brought the delinquents to the cemetery, but no May or Willard was in waiting.

"Serves us right," said Merle; "we 'll have the pleasure of walking through this spooky place alone."

"Two is company, I thought," said Bob.

"But four is a crowd," said Merle with a shiver, as she glanced from the grewsome tombstones to the darkened sky, quite forgetting that she was too advanced in her studies to have unscientific shivers. The path soon narrowed and she started on ahead, braving her fears, and trying not to see the many suggestive shapes her fancy conjured. She had just turned a bend when a rift in the scurrying clouds brought a sudden flood of moonlight which fell on a draped statue, and brought it into startling relief. Merle gave a little gasp and skipped back to Bob's side, and though his jolly laugh reassured her, the shock left her still more unnerved, and she was thankful when they left the cemetery and started across the fields that led to the ruined cellar and the group of lilacs.

As they neared the spot, however, the story of its

murder and the reputed ghosts that nightly walked there took sudden hold of Merle's imagination, and her legs trembled beneath her. The walking was bad, rocky and somewhat boggy, and her sudden weakness added to the difficulty.

Finally she stopped, intending to admit her fears and to urge return, when the clump of lilac bushes outlined themselves at so short a distance ahead that she took courage and stumbled along again. No word had been spoken for several moments, and she wondered if the story were in Bob's mind, and if he too felt any alarm. She wanted to turn and question him and be reassured by his denial, but the treacherous walking made speech difficult, and the words died on her lips.

She stumbled along, feeling unaccountably weak, but encouraging herself now and then with a glance at the nearing bushes. It had just occurred to her that if May and Willard were already there, they were within calling distance; and she glanced up, feeling comfort in the thought of their near presence, when a shrouded apparation with a death's face floated out from the bushes and wavered in the path.

Bob saw it at the same instant, and, man that he was, he felt his hair rise and the blood chill in his veins. While he stood rooted to the spot, the figure

seemingly divided, and two shapes took the place of one. Robbed of all volition Bob stood numbed, when a suppressed giggle reached his strained senses and woke him to a possible truth.

"May! Willard!" he called in a dry voice, at which invocation the forms broke into a merry dance with much waving of draperies and many ghostly gestures.

His fright over, Bob's first conscious thought was for Merle. So quickly had it happened and so unnerving had the moment been, that his mind had been swept of all but fright. He reached out now, expecting to touch her at his side, but his hand swept the air, and no response answered his call.

"Merle! Merle!" he cried, groping forward. A step, and he stumbled,—not a match could he find though he searched every pocket; then stooping he brushed his hand against a mass of hair, and knew that Merle had fainted.

"This is a healthy trick!" he cried savagely, as the ghosts, alarmed at his unanswered call to Merle, floated to the side of the fallen figure. "Don't offer apologies—clear out!" he continued, forgetting his manners to the one girl in his concern for the other. "Don't stand there gazing; do something quick! Get a lantern, and prepare Mrs. Norton."

May fled, speechless, stumbling over the rocky

ground, terrified at the result of her joke, her white sheet billowing with the wind, while Willard kept pace at her side, too frightened to offer comfort.

"Merle! Merle!" called Bob, chafing the cold hands and straining his eyes to peer through the darkness. "Merle!"

"Yes," came in a scarcely audible whisper.

"Oh, what can I do! What can I do?"

"I 'm—better—now."

"The ground is too wet for you to lie there. Let me help you up—can you stand?" questioned Bob, at his wits' end.

Merle struggled weakly to her feet, and stood dazed and trembling, glancing quickly around, as if looking for something she expected yet dreaded to see.

"It 's all right," comforted Bob, divining the situation at once. "It 's all right. It was only Willard and May dressed in sheets, with phosphorus smeared on their faces. There 's nothing here,—don't cry, there 's a dear girl, but let us move on out of this damp, dark place. You 'll feel better when you see a light. Don't try to guide yourself—please lean on me. It 's dark—no one will see—do you mind?" whispered Bob as he supported the weak, trembling figure with a strong arm. "May goes too far in her jokes."

"She did n't think—she 's so impetuous," said Merle, excusingly; "and I was n't feeling well to-night or I should n't have fainted."

"Nevertheless, May ought to sober down, and not learn her lessons at too dear a price to others."

"Is—is it far?" faltered Merle, leaning heavily on her support.

"Are you faint again?"

"My—my wrist," sobbed Merle.

Bob reached out, touched a wet sleeve and dripping hand, and caught the fainting girl in his arms.

"Oh, Merle," he whispered, caressing the unconscious face with a frightened kiss, "oh, Merle,—if you 're hurt,—if they 've hurt you,—I never shall forgive them in all my life."

Bob stumbled along, cursing every false step that jarred his burden, and wondering what the culprits were doing that they did not return with the light.

They were doing their best, those two, nevertheless, as they flew through the graveyard with flying sheets and ashen green faces, startling several loiterers out of a year's growth, and giving substantial foundation to the ghost stories which haunted that spot for years to come.

They met midway, and the lantern served to show the serious cut of Merle's wrist. An arm-chair was made with crossed hands, and Bob consented to

share his burden for the better comfort of the injured one. May led, lighting the way with the lantern, her face pale as the fainting Merle's, and her legs weak with repentance.

Mrs. Norton's sitting-room couch was in readiness, with towels, bandages, hot water, and brandy at hand; but one look at Merle made her distrust home remedies, and she said with quiet decision:

"Get the nearest physician at once."

His buggy soon careened round the corner, and May left her watch in the unlighted parlor and let him in,—certainly a startling usher in her ghostly guise, which she had not thought to remove. The doctor first stared, then smiled, and finally shook his head as if he had found a clue to the sudden call for professional help.

"It 's a bad gash, and she 's lost a good deal of blood; but the artery is not cut, and she 'll be all right in a few days," he said reassuringly, smoothing back the tangled hair and putting his ear to the invalid's chest. "But I don't quite like the heart action," he continued after listening a moment. "Has she had any sudden bad news, or a fright?"

"She has had a fright," admitted Mrs. Norton, studiously keeping her eyes from looking at the sheeted figure at her side.

"Ah, yes; I see, I see," said the doctor as he

glanced from the spectre to his watch and felt for a flickering pulse. "Young people's jokes sometimes turn out to be no joke, but rather serious. We 'll have to take a few stitches in this wrist; and with this unsteady little heart, we can't use ether."

Merle opened her eyes at this, and her frightened glance swept their faces. She was quite undone, poor girl! with what she had already suffered, and the thought of further pain was terrifying.

"It will soon be over, dear," said the doctor encouragingly; "soon be over! Be a brave girl."

May burst into a paroxysm of tears and was speedily shut out into the hall . Mrs. Norton moved quietly about, making all necessary preparations; Bob, with lips as colorless as Merle's own, seated himself by the couch and firmly supported the wounded wrist for the doctor to operate on.

"Raise her a trifle; that 's better. Close your eyes, child, and remember it will soon be over."

One, two, three, stitches were taken in the slim little wrist, and no sound escaped the white lips; four stitches, five stitches,—still no sound, through drops of perspiration stood on Merle's forehead, and the gray eyes were pathetic with pain. Six stitches, seven!—"Bravo! it 's over,—the brandy, quick!" said the doctor.

Bob snatched the ready glass from Willard and

held it to Merle's lips, but his hand shook, and the observant doctor, without comment, relieved him. Moreover, as soon as Merle had swallowed it, he mixed another glass and was about to offer it to Bob when a sudden thud drew all eyes to the door.

May had been standing there, stifling her sobs; but every stitch that the needle had taken in Merle's wrist had seemed like two in hers. She had sentenced herself to endure the sight as a penance for her thoughtlessness, and had withstood the strain until Merle's head dropped. Then suddenly the room spun round, and for the first time in her life May fainted; but was quickly revived, thanks to her naturally strong constitution and the doctor's ready dose of brandy.

No word relative to the affair had been spoken among its chief actors since the house had been reached, but the strained atmosphere made itself felt at every turn. Bob left May's restoration severely to her mother and Willard, devoting his attention entirely to Merle.

Having made the sufferer comfortable for the night, the doctor left, promising to return in the morning. Merle had fallen into an exhausted sleep; May sat bedewing a cup of very hot tea with very salt tears; Mrs. Norton moved cautiously about, lowering lights and closing up for the night.

"Remember, it is my privilege to be called if anything is needed," said Bob; "promise me that."

"I gladly promise you, Bob. You have surely earned the privilege; but I think the worst is over. Good-night."

Bob left the room without looking in May's direction, and her tears flowed faster. In the hall he encountered Willard, who, after a moment of strained silence, held out his hand, saying:

"I 've been an ass; I ought to have known better. I 'm thoroughly ashamed of myself; if saying so would only help matters ——"

"Unfortunately it does n't," said Bob coldly. "I 'll accept your apology, but I 'm not in the mood for hand-shaking to-night."

"All right," said Will resignedly; "I deserve it. You can't blame me as much as I blame myself."

There was something in the tone that made Bob pause, and remind himself that he was—or should be —a gentleman. He turned back, said, "Pardon me, Will; I 'm a little overwrought, I think," shook hands, and went out, leaving Will with tears in his eyes.

That night's work proved to be something more serious to Merle than an injured wrist. She had been looking and feeling poorly for some weeks. The increasing duties of school, together with the care

of the little home, however cheerfully and dutifully its routine was accomplished, had plainly made too severe a draft on a constitution perfectly normal and healthful, but not backed with much reserve; consequently Merle suffered a slight breakdown and kept her room for days,—not seriously ill after the first, but simply submitting to nature's ringing down of the curtain for rest between the acts.

All would have been well if this autocratic nurse had kindly waited for the summer vacation which was nearing; but for a prospective graduate to find herself on her back just as the cramming season was at hand; and for a budding author, not to mention a future virtuoso, to find her gifted hand in splints, required a meeker spirit than Merle's to submit gracefully.

The doctor had put his foot down hard on school and all its requirements, without the slightest thought of lifting even his heel; but the gray eyes had a faculty of lifting a great deal, and before the first week was over the good man was amazed to find himself consenting to the invalid's continuing her studies at home.

Mrs. Norton, prompted mostly by the generosity of an ever generous heart, but also by the wish to make amends for the work of her black sheep, fitted up the bride's new room with the blue set, and the

invalid was therein enthroned. A dainty bird's-eggs-blue tea gown dropped apparently from the skies and filled the invalid's cup to overflowing. No one was seen making it, no one knew anything about its purchase, and a surprising and questionable state of ignorance met all Merle's queries. Perhaps the student's lamp that had burned very late o' nights in Mrs. Norton's bedroom, and May's account book wherein she made heroic balances with her allowance, might have whispered a clue or two.

The chief culprit was at once forgiven; for Merle's first smile was for the penitent face that hung over hers with such dog-like pleading in the blue eyes that it would have taken a far harder heart than Merle's to harbor blame. Many were the tears shed over the bandaged hand,—quiet tears that May surreptitiously wiped on the counterpane, on her dress sleeve, or on Pickles' beloved head.

Poor May! she drank deep from the cup of her own bitter brewing; and perhaps the unlooked-for results of an ill-starred prank cured her of her last girlish thoughtlessness. Her grief and penitence were so sincere that Mrs. Norton felt no mother's heart could add to her burden, but instead wiped away her tears and kissed the trembling lips, thereby teaching her the beauty and help of forgiveness,—wise mother bear! not to discount the value of her

warnings by pointing out the bee when her little cub had already felt its sting.

Bob's indignation held out longest, for he believed May to be mainly responsible for the affair; but even he unbent when she proved her devotion not only by constant and loving attendance upon the invalid, but tactfully made herself scarce on divers occasions when his presence had graced the invalid's chamber. May accepted her return to favor humbly, and treated that gentleman with a respect never before observed in their relations.

The doctor had no sooner been twisted round Merle's finger than May established herself as book-bearer, and daily brought Merle her consignment of work. Others of her friends came out strong in this hour of need, and willing hands copied miles of blackboard work. Charming girlish notes mourned her absence, while those loquaciously inclined kept her posted on the vital gossip that spiced their small world.

Merle was an easy and accomplished scholar, and she felt no doubt of her ability to continue her studies alone; but to have your nuts cracked and the meat handed to you is one fact; to crack your nuts yourself, and in the bungling lose half the meat, is quite another. Bob—wise and disinterested young man!—saw this at once; and having just been over

the ground kindly offered to crack all mental nuts and free the meats for the invalid's better consumption.

So it came about that Harvard saw much less of one of its sophomores, and a plain, brown-stooped house saw much more. To the casual observer it might have seemed to be the doctor,—this tall, broad-shouldered individual who so regularly made his scheduled call; for he rang the bell like a privileged person, stalked down the hall and through the sitting-room into the invalid's room without even so much as "by-your-leave," tossed down his bag and hat and ulster, and, turning, took a very slim little hand in his own and held it long enough to count a dozen pulses. Then he kept a sharp eye out for draughts from doors and windows, and learned to manipulate shawls and pillows with really feminine skill. A most assiduous doctor this, for he seldom came without some token of his well-wishing; usually flowers which were evidently a bitter draught to his over-drugged patient, for she demurred and blushed and waved them away, and ended—by drinking deep of their fragrance.

There the doctor's rôle ended and the pedagogue's began. A second rocker was drawn near to the first,—very near,—which of course was necessary where one book was being shared; and then the tutor skilfully put the blue-robed invalid through a

course of mental sprouts. Historical facts became wonderfully easy to remember when a strong hand wrote them out; chemical symbols lost much of their obtuseness when a pair of eloquent eyes assisted in their committal; even geometrical obscurities melted like mist before the sun, rhomboids, cylinders, and prisms developing surprising beauties never before observed in their outline.

Merle took kindly to her convalescence after the first pain was over, finding the bride's room, the blue gown, the unwearying devotion of May and Mrs. Norton, the affectionate anxiety of her father, the unflagging interest of her tutor, and the solicitations of her many friends—all sweet, strangely sweet; yet she wondered how much of the harvest was really from her own planting. She had grown humble.

Later, when the ban for quiet was removed, the well-wishing of friends took place in person, and on one day in particular Merle held quite a reception in the bride's chamber. Something in the weather must have tempted the visitors forth, for May found her post as door-tender almost as arduous as on the night of the famous Flapjack Party.

The stylish Miss Weston, who as before-mentioned had made Merle the gift of her music course, upset the quiet neighborhood by dashing down its narrow street behind a pair of champing bays. She tripped

up the plain wooden steps as daintily as if they were of marble, thereby displaying a set of marvellously ruffled petticoats for Bridget's edification,—Bridget being ensconced in the basement window behind the rubber plant. She must have made something more than a perfunctory call, for Mrs. Hall, the next-door neighbor, could have told you that the carriage passed and repassed sixteen times to a count,—for did n't it tally with the coachman's buttons?

Mrs. Bendonsa, rigid in her Sunday best, with the four little Bendonsas scrubbed and combed to perfection, pulled shyly at the bell, but forgot her shyness in the cordial clasp of a thin little hand, and was almost startled into telling her beads again as she looked up at the tall madonna-like girl in the flowing gown.

The Captain, who had just returned alone from a journey, broke the taboo of his own establishing; for he mounted the steps in his tall silk beaver, and rapped vigorously at the door with his cane, the bell evidently escaping him. Such a wave of excitement as swept over the inmates within! but May cooled her ire in time to greet him with respect; Mrs. Norton shook hands cordially, too much of a lady to show discourtesy to a guest; while Merle clearly surprised the dignified Captain, for she rose to her full height with the grace of a queen, and extended her

hand as if well aware of the value of the privilege she conferred.

Classmates and friends all seemed impelled to leave their cards on the day in question, bringing dainties for the invalid's consumption, or the season's flowers to fill the table and overflow to the mantel.

By night Merle was quite exhausted by these social honors, and her nerves were in a decidedly hysterical condition. Yet more remained, for as the afternoon had failed of her tutor's presence, the evening supplied it.

Merle left the bride's room for some reason best known to herself, decorated the sitting-room with her many flowers, stirred the open grate into glowing life, for though warm outside, the house had a chill undesirable for the invalid, and drawing up the lounging chair, buried herself in its cushions to await her tutor.

She had never disappointed him in her lessons, but to-night the task seemed beyond her and she begged release. So it came about that the student's lamp shed its soft light over a magazine instead of a text-book, and Bob "shook" the rôle of tutor and became an invalid's reader.

Merle lay luxuriously amidst her cushions, with the shadows from the flickering fire playing hide-and-

seek in the folds of her blue gown and the waves of her chestnut hair. Her mind rehearsed the afternoon's surprises and pleasures as her glance rested on the pretty gown, on the glowing fire, on the groups of flowers that bespoke forethought and consideration for her, even to the kind companion at her side on whom her eyes rested last.

It was her one wish to be loved, and to-day had proved to her as never before how much she had gained in overcoming her false pride, in opening up her plain little home, and in making friends for friendship's sake, with no thought of social position or contrast. Her eyes filled and the tears streamed down her cheeks as the reader's voice rose and fell on unheeding ears. Perhaps Bob felt the lack of interest in his audience, for he glanced up inquiringly just in time to meet the glistening eyes turned full upon him.

Bob dropped his book on the table, himself on the hassock, and in a voice sympathetic enough to solace one far more afflicted, inquired what was the matter.

"Nothing," said Merle, contradicting her answer with increased sobs.

"There must be something, my dear;—what have I done to wound you?"

"I—I—was only thinking how lovely it is to—to have so many friends," sobbed Merle,

pointing with a wave of her hand to her many gifts and flowers.

However surprising her cause of tears to the male breast, Bob behaved with the greatest presence of mind, offered his handkerchief, seeing Merle grope for hers, rearranged the shawl over her shoulders, and, forgetting to remove his hand, supplemented it with the other, and suddenly drawing the slender figure to him, patted the weeper comfortingly on the back.

"Oh, don't—please don't—I 'm such a simpleton," murmured Merle, trying to struggle back to her pillows, but not succeeding. "I—guess I—I 've had too much—too much company—and—and——"

Bob admitted that she probably had had too much company, though he showed no impulse to remove the immediate guest, and after an introspective pause even found himself hard enough of heart to wish that Merle's friends would occasionally unnerve her with their devotion if only the restoration were left to him.

With a view to effect, I ought to say, perhaps, that Merle nestled back in her pillows, pale, tear-stained, and beautiful, but facts constrain me to admit that our heroine's eyes were quite red, likewise her classic nose, to say nothing of its being a trifle swollen and decidedly shiny.

What the next step in this melodrama would have been is hard to say, if, as Bob glanced up, his eyes had not lighted on a slim figure silhouetted against the bedroom gloom. May it was who stood glued to the threshold, unable alike to retreat or to advance; for the sight of her reserved and dignified goddess actually weeping on a male breast robbed her of her breath, her tact, her abundant common-sense.

Her encounter with Bob's eyes broke the spell, however, and she dashed into the room and, with a relapse into the carelessness that she had been trying to conquer, stumbled over Roy's engine, bumped into the lounge, and nearly sent the student lamp into the open grate as she leaned over the table and turned on a flood of gaslight that rivalled noonday and scattered romance to the four winds.

No slightest allusion was ever made to this interesting domestic tableau by its dramatis personæ, but Merle remembered it, being somewhat disturbed by the new set of emotions that the moment had awakened, and suddenly dismissing her tutor, reässumed her rôle as Mentor, and returned to school.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SWEET GIRL GRADUATE

The Hall of Fame had opened its doors hospitably this glorious June morning while its revered works of art, its caryatides, and its Philosophers of the Ancient School looked down condescendingly on the eager motley throng that filled each settee to the point of discomfort, and overflowed to the aisles and window ledges.

Proud mammas, arrayed in their best bibs and tuckers, with the happy light of realized hope in their tired eyes, and each with the conscious thought that her beruffled, beflowered, white-robed darling would be quite the flower of the bunch, smiled amicably into one another 's faces, in sympathy with all motherhood.

Bald-headed papas—no less proud—sat wedged in between billows of frills and furbelows, endured the agony of starched fronts and saw-edged collars and the sure prospect of a three-hours martydom,

cheerfully contributing their presence in conformity with the tenets of a well-regulated society.

Uncles, aunts, and cousins were out in force, all in their Sunday best, as proof positive of the social scale to which the honored one belonged; while a goodly sprinkling of young males formed the background to this human bouquet, and bid fair to be much in evidence later on.

June roses blossomed from every nook and cranny, making the air heavy with their spiced perfume; ponderous tomes reposed on the master's desk,—this master who for three long years had taught this young idea how to shoot; baskets of rolled and pink-bowed diplomas graced the platform front—those Meccas of Endeavor toward which hundreds had trodden a long and weary way; semi-circles of chairs further graced this platform, tantalizingly suggestive in their emptiness of the sweet girl graduates that were to be.

Now and then some darling of the hour flitted in and out, not so quickly but that a pretty color mounted to her conscious cheek as a wave of expectancy turned all faces admiringly in her direction.

Reasonably near the front was a settee containing a group that obviously held one interest in common. There was an old, white-haired, white-kerchiefed lady

who seemed much in evidence because of a golden-haired laddie who sat astride her lap, and just at present was poking his tan shoes through the spokes of the opposite settee into the back of its much-enduring occupant. Beside her sat a light-haired, blue-eyed witch of a girl, who had evidently done her best to subdue a generally fly-away look to her person with small success. Next came a sweet, matronly woman in black, who divided her attention between a white-haired, venerable looking man at her side and a tall young man who flanked the settee's end.

"They 're coming! I saw the line when the door swung back!" whispered May shrilly; and before she had time to compose her excited person, the doors in truth swung back, and the day's exercises began.

They wavered an instant, this grouping of sweet, budding womanhood just on the threshold of the fuller life to come, and then the long, white, diaphanous line undulated gracefully into motion.

"She 's the fourth!" volunteered the locutor, with difficulty keeping her seat.

She *was* the fourth, in height, not scholarship; and perhaps eyes, other than those eager ones, found something in the tall, graceful girl that riveted their attention. For Merle was blessed with that indescribable quality which we call "charm." You saw it in the curve of her throat, in the poise of her

head, in the waves of her hair, in the soft folds of the dotted muslin. Nothing detracted from the pleasure of your glance; not a trinket, not a flower; nothing marred the perfect curves of her slim maidenly figure.

"Ganny" wiped her glasses and looked twice, but doing her best to show no sign of conscious pride. Mrs. Norton's eyes followed the tall, slender figure from its entrance to its seat on the platform, and her eyes saw much behind the scenes. They saw the patient stitches a weak little hand had put into the dotted muslin that looked so innocent of the effort it had cost its mistress; they saw the home these same patient little hands had tried to make for the white-haired Philosopher at her own side—this white-haired Philosopher who was suddenly attacked with surprisingly weak eyes considering the shortness of distance, and who, after making several attempts to accustom them to the strain, blew his nose quite savagely and devoted his attention to the programme. They saw, these kindly eyes, the praiseworthy endeavor that had overridden illness and passed examinations with honor; they saw the sweet face flushed with excitement and eagerness, but modest and unconscious; they and others, too, saw her break the line, and with a pretty deference step aside to let a teacher pass; they saw her give

an encouraging squeeze to the hand of a trembling comrade about to taste the bitter-sweet of a public declamation; and, finally, they saw her file modestly into the second row and efface herself, when her place was rightfully in the front.

This last effacement completely upset May—poor May! who was in a treacherously emotional state; for she sniffed audibly, and was just swallowing an hysterical gulp, when Roy upset them all by exclaiming in a loud voice of baby-glee, as he pointed a wet finger in a wavering direction:

"Dar—dar 's my dear Mer-Mer!"

"She 's the handsomest one in the class!" said May, recovering herself with a superior sniff of her freckled nose at the plain Misses So and So that followed, and a tall young man that flanked the settee's end pulled up his trouser-legs for the preservation of their crease, and pulled down his cuffs to afford an ampler view of immaculate linen, and smiled into the merry blue eyes with lips that spoke no denial.

The honor of representing her class in physics had been offered to Merle, for, by some curious trick of the brain or by inheritance, she excelled in this study, though her natural tastes inclined her in a diametrically opposite direction; but her illness had made unnecessary effort seem unwise, and reluctantly

(for she was human and loved to shine) she had passed on the distinction.

Each subject was represented by the paragon of the class, and learned papers that had cost hours of midnight oil were read in trembling voices that fell for the most part on unintelligent ears. Fortunate it was for the audience that the charm of the expositor somewhat beguiled the tedium of her discourse, though fans hid many yawns, and the younger element writhed in misery.

The singing was the one redeeming feature, for the class had been well trained, and their clear voices rose in unison or blended in harmony with surprising sweetness. All could enjoy this, all could feel the poetry of those sweet-singing white-robed young girls, pausing a moment between the bud and the sweeter and fuller flower of womanhood.

"Consider and hear me, O Lord, my God," rose reverently from many throats and floated off on the rose-laden air, filling eyes that were unused to such softening, and making a bond of sympathy between the irascible, bald-headed old man who sneezed and looked savagely at the windows for signs of draughts, and some round-shouldered little seamstress who wept to her heart's content in an unobtrusive corner, giving thanks out of a full heart for the beautiful consummation of her life's work in

the graduation of a dear sister's child whom she had mothered for patient years.

Prosy and stereotyped speeches followed from those gate-tenders of pedagogic advancement, those venerables of the past, whose slow shelving was lightened by this annual airing. Too long, too dismal, too admonitory were all but one, a little man who hustled on the stage, and what was far more to the purpose, hustled off before his long-enduring audience felt like stoning him.

He did not tell them, this brisk little man, that they were tottering on the brink of stern reality, and that all the joys and sweets of youth were gone forever. Instead, he made each girl graduate feel the beauty of the fuller life that was unquestionably hers, a life that each year would make richer, for only the low price of steady endeavor.

Though Merle had effaced herself physically and mentally, her hour of reckoning came with the distribution of the diplomas; for then, no matter how successful a disciplinarian the master may be, the class will show its preference, and the favorites in this or that particular receive a public demonstration.

Many favorites had already received their ovation; many hands were sore from clapping; and much of the audience was growing restless. Merle's diploma was nearly the last, but as the guest of the

occasion turned over its coil, pushed the bow off its inscription, and read "Merle Royce Elliot" such a thunder of applause rose that the caryatides and the venerable busts shook on their pedestals, and the roses trembled on their stems.

The audience must have caught the infection, if not impelled by the charm of this bit of girlhood, for they stamped and thumped their canes, and clapped their hands, while a merry blue-eyed girl and a tall brown-eyed young man might have been supposed to be on the verge of an apoplectic fit.

Merle bowed over the proffered diploma with the grace that had once so nearly upset the dignified Captain, and now quite upset the white-haired dispenser of diplomas, for he held on to his end far longer than occasion demanded, and deepened the color in the cheeks of this sweet girl graduate.

Soon the curtain fell, and in a twinkling the halls swarmed with these distinguished young participants of the day's exercises, each labelled with a pink-bowed diploma, which the most careless hugged with zealous care. Through the various rooms they escorted their guests, each making mental notes on the strength and style of the other's following, and explaining learnedly the while the many exhibits of the year's work, intending to strike awe (and succeeding) by the depth and vastness of their learning.

Merle was in great demand, and with difficulty did the honors to her guests; for her photographs and autographs were urgently solicited, and she was constantly being whisked off and taken possession of by admiring groups.

There was to be a dance in the evening to assuage the anguish of good-byes, and most of the girls had plans for the afternoon. Merle was to go for a drive, as the day was perfect, and Bob still clung to the rôle of doctor. She felt very grand as she bowled along in a luxuriously upholstered carriage behind a prancing chestnut; indeed she was quite intoxicated with the elixir life was offering her of late, and drank deep of its inspiration. Life was very full and rich just now to the fair young maiden, and the future promised to be still fuller and richer.

A marvellous flow of conversation outdid the day in brilliancy,—a conversation that one at least took pains should not lag; for beneath this surface glitter and ripple was an undercurrent of feeling that kept the gray eyes for the most part on the scenery; or when, as occasionally happened, they were unavoidably surprised, they were veiled quickly.

The day's glories ended in a dance given in the High School building. Merle donned her dotted muslin for the second time in a flutter of excitement,

for she had never danced with Bob, and to-night, thanks to her basement drill, she would prove to that young gentleman that her graces and accomplishments were on a par with any normal girl.

Her cheeks burned and her eyes flashed, for how could she look like a meek little Quaker when she had the most personable following of males in the hall, and her dances were fairly gobbled off her card?

There was Bob, positively stunning in his full-dress suit, and with such grace of manner that he disarmed the most critical; and there was Willard, frank and cordial; each with a following of closest friends; to say nothing of Frank, who, it was well known, had already been singed at the goddess' shrine, nor of Bob's cousin Will, most opportunely returned from Amherst in time to snatch a dance or two.

Yes, in spite of the day's intoxication, Merle had found time to breathe a little girlish prayer for help to enable her to merit all these pleasures by giving thought and consideration to others. The verse in her album was unconsciously doing good; it was often on her lips, and its sentiment was growing in her heart—

"Is she kind as she is fair?
For beauty lives with kindness."

Your pleasure, not mine, became her motto for the evening, and surprisingly easy it was to live up to it, when she had once made the resolve to smile pleasantly on those less popular than herself, though indifferent oversight had been her first impulse; to share her partners generously; to beguile wall-flowers into animated groups; to smile approval on May, who was outdoing herself in decorum for her goddess' sake; and to accept the many attentions offered her with a graciousness that spoke no surfeit. Yet this endeavor that nestled in her heart did not cool the flush of her cheek, nor dim the sparkle of her eye; but it may, perhaps, have accounted for some serious sweetness that her partners unconsciously felt—a sweetness that lay deeper than the mere surface prettiness of her face.

As for Bob, he deported himself with great credit considering the conflict of emotions he underwent when a small white gloved hand rested in his own, and a chestnut head became so fascinating in its nearness that he had no eyes left for the very necessary art of steering. In short, after one or two breathless encounters, when he had come fatally near upsetting his dignified mentor through his own stupidity, Bob skilfully laid the blame on the wanton mob, and proposed that they cool off in a saunter in the outer corridor. Merle agreed, and silently made its

détour on the arm of her distinguished, black-frocked knight. Suddenly she paused as if some thought had taken definite form in her mind, and said shyly:

"Bob, I 've a favor to ask."

"A thousand, and I 'm at your service."

"No, don't promise so rashly,—it may be very disagreeable to you; and perhaps I ought not to suggest it, but—it sounds silly I know—but, you see I want to be kind to every one to-night—and—are you laughing?"

"Do I look it?"

Bob did n't look it, but he evidently looked something else, for Merle quickly turned her glance to the case of minerals they were passing, and continued:

"There 's Miss Bond over in the corner,—we 've passed her several times,—she 's colored—though not very dark, as you see; but she 's a nice girl, very bright, and a great favorite with the master. They call her Sir Tom's 'chocolate drop.' She came to-night, not quite realizing what it would be like, perhaps, and I suspect she 's had a horrid time. I 've watched her all the evening, and she has n't danced once. She is n't darker than many an Italian, and —and if you would only dance with her once, all the others would follow, and——

Merle paused for breath, quite frightened at her request now that it was exposed to the bold glare of spoken words, and looked appealingly at her companion. Bob stopped walking, pulled down his vest, buttoned and unbottoned his gloves thoughtfully, and then suddenly squared his shoulders and said determinedly.

"Telemachus bows to his Mentor."

"Willingly, Bob?"

"Willingly, Merle."

Merle took his arm with a smile of approval that made the walk between the mineral cabinet and Sir Tom's "chocolate drop" a path strewn with ambrosia, and presented him to Miss Bond without the slightest trace of condescension.

When Bob gallantly escorted his new partner into the Hall of Fame there was a flutter of well-bred excitement; but he, perhaps better than any other, could take the initiative tactfully, and make it easy for those he forced to follow in his wake. For Merle's entire following was drafted, and that night became a memorable one to Miss Bond.

It was late, unreasonably late, when the musicians ambered their fiddles for the last time and laid them snugly in their cases; yet the hall, the corridors, and the dressing-rooms were swarming with white-winged girls. It seemed hard to leave—many would not re-

turn for the advanced term—hard to leave the dear old spot which three years of serious work and some frolics had made to most their vital world.

There were many limp handkerchiefs and red eyes; many roses crushed in impetuous hugs, many eternal friendships vowed and sealed; many whispered hopes and plans confided; many autographs and photographs exchanged; many fat beribboned and sealed envelopes bestowed on the popular ones, prophetic of the coming years, with the day, the hour, the minute of their opening defined; many clubs forced into mushroom growth by those who felt that the progress of the world would be retarded by the scattering of their intellectual forces; while each and all and every one vowed life-long loyalty to her Alma Mater, and smiled consciously at the crowning dignity of being at last a full-fledged alumna.

Merle had wept her little weep, had whispered her last good-bye, and had been bowled along the cobbled streets in a coach and pair; for the young man at her side would not suffer the indignity of a street-car on this day of days, and in secret took sly satisfaction in this outwitting of his Mentor, who had cruelly put her foot down hard on suggestions of a graduation gift.

Mrs. Norton's front hall had just been relieved of two lingering incumbents when a coach swept up

to the door, and in a twinkling its quiet was broken by this second pair.

"Oh, Bob, what a cup of joy has been held to my lips to-day!" said Merle brightly, as she shook a stray curl from her eyes which her "cloud" had dishevelled, and turned to say good-night. "A full cup, pressed down and running over!"

"Not so full as that; let there be room for something more," whispered Bob, his hands lingering as he unfolded the shawl from the soft muslin dress, and leaned very near to catch the girl's answer.

"Not another drop!" laughed Merle nervously, with a wave of her pretty bare arms. "With Portia I shall say—

> "'In measure rain thy joy; scant this excess;
> I fear too much thy blessing; make it less,
> For fear I surfeit.'"

"Say the whole passage, dear:

> "'Oh love, be moderate! allay thy ecstasy;
> In measure rain thy joy; scant——'"

"That is n't the passage I mean—that is—it—it does n't matter—there 's a dreadful draught here."

"Let me put on your shawl again, then. Listen! Every one has had some privilege from you to-day, do I alone go begging? I saw Mrs. Norton kiss you, May kiss you, a dozen girls kiss you, and yet when

I held out my hand for congratulations, you sped across the hall."

"Somebody wanted me."

"Somebody wants you now. Look at me, you witch! Why do you avoid me?"

"I—why—really—truly—see," said the dissembler with pretty, artless *abandon*,—"see, there 's my hand to disprove it."

Bob took it in both his own, glanced down at the sweet, sensitive face, wavered an instant, and then as if mastering some further impulse, raised the little hand to his lips.

"Good-night, my Mentor."

"Good—good-night."

CHAPTER XVII

CANOEING

"'One, I love—
Two, I love—
Three, I love the same—
Four, I love with all my heart——'"

The deep fringed valance of a luxurious hammock swept gracefully to and fro, fanned into motion, seemingly, by some force other than the gentlest of summer zephyrs. In truth the pendulum-like touches of a small black foot accounted for its motion, for a pink-robed Vandal reclined among its cushions.

A despoiler of nature, this pink-robed Vandal, for her dress was flecked with daisy petals and the ground strewn with their discarded hearts. Now and then the white fingers paused in their prophetic work, and a pair of gray eyes peered apprehensively through the meshes of the hammock, and on through the interstices of the closely screening shrubbery that ensconced her. Then the incompleted talisman

drooped in her hand, while this dreamy Vandal drank in the beauty of the fleecy sky, the rustling leaves, the song of the birds busy in their housekeeping, drank in the fragrance of the summer air rich with the incense a myriad blooms had offered up at nature's shrine.

Her last search had been rewarded by no nearer presence than that of a small chipmunk who sat trimming his whiskers on a swaying branch; and Merle, oblivious to what the tree-trunk hid, set her fears at rest, her hammock in motion, and returned to her fortune-telling.

"Let me see, I left off at four:

"'Five, I cast away—
Six, he loves—
Seven, she loves—
Eight, they both love—
Nine, he comes——'"

"Nine, he comes!" echoed a manly voice.

"Mercy, Bob! how you frightened me!"

"A thousand pardons! but don't let me interrupt. Go on with your fairy work."

"Wanton work, you mean, just busy idleness. Does that sound paradoxical?"

"Finish the daisy, please."

"I 've finished enough already, I should think," laughed Merle, as she gathered a handful of white petals and showered the intruder.

"The flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la, have something to do with this case. Where 's the rest of that fortune-telling daisy?"

"It was a winged messenger, and flew away when your unhallowed feet touched this holy ground."

"It flew no higher than the grass, deceitful one! for I saw it drop—here, finish it."

"My stint is done."

"Then must I finish for myself, cruel—not an arduous task, for but two are left. 'Nine, he comes,' we said; 'ten, he tarries, eleven, he courts!' Wise flower, I salute thee!" said Bob, touching the yellow heart with his lips.

"I think this glorious weather affects you," said Merle mischievously. "It does affect poets, and I don't know why it should n't ——"

"Lovers! don't let the word trip you, lady, it 's a rôle I long to act."

"I 've lain here, idling, for an hour," said Merle with intentional irrelevance. "It 's so heavenly looking up through these trees into the blue sky. I 'm glad I live."

"So am I. When I go out these glorious mornings I feel like Atlas, strong to brace my

shoulders for any load the world may see fit to impose."

"If I don't brace mine quickly, they 'll not be strong enough to hold me. In physiology we learn that disuse leads to atrophy. But I promised to drift for a few weeks, and drift I did. Perhaps it 's just as well, if I don't get too confirmed in laziness, for now Della's home she shares the work, and I 'm taking quite kindly to the rôle of second fiddle; it 's really easy if you keep your mind off the first. My music I confess I miss; as for the scribbling, rest may be beneficial there, for it is said that 'Observation is nine points of composition.' "

"Be sure of that! Experience is also a wise teacher, and every colt needs pasture for development."

"But every colt does n't get it so richly as I do," said Merle nervously. "I have not thanked you; but of course I know who is at the bottom of this camping out."

"And I have not thanked you for giving in and coming; though why you held off ——"

"It will do Mrs. Norton and father so much good," interrupted Merle, "and Roy and Grace too; and we 'll be a jolly crowd if May does n't get drowned or chewed up."

"I 've heard you say all that before, but never that it would give *you* pleasure. I did n't plan on making it a duty for you; is it?" asked Bob earnestly.

"A duty? how absurd! Of course not; *cela va sans dire.* But please excuse me while I run up to the house and get my sewing or a book; I ought not to idle away this glorious day."

"It 's a rôle that you fill to perfection, which should redeem it enough for you to keep it up a little longer. And you don't need to go for a book; I have two volumes of Shakespeare in my pocket; he should be sufficiently refreshing for your literary thirst. Which will you have—the lovers in the Forest of Arden, or the balcony scene between Romeo and Juliet?"

"Neither—I dislike extracts."

"Why, I thought you were particularly fond of them; you 're always quoting."

"I don't feel in the mood to-day."

"Then I 'll begin at the beginning—which play please?"

"Choose yourself. I know both by heart."

"Poor surfeited darling! she sha'n't be bored. Unfortunately that exhausts my resources for entertainment, so let 's talk."

"Talk away."

"Charming day, is n't it?"

"Charming!"

"Do you remember where Lorenzo says: 'In such a night did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well'? One could be pardoned for paraphrasing it and saying: 'In such a day did ——'"

"Oh no! daylight is far too garish for love; every true poet feels that."

"Not every poet. Don't you recall what Keats says?"

"Mercy! are you preparing to write a love story?"

"No, only to act one. Will you help, Merle?"

"Do you notice how high the sun is getting? It must be near noon, which means lunch. What time is it, please?"

"Never mind the time. *Won't* you answer me?"

"But I do mind the time. Della is always so annoyed when I come to the table late. I really must go."

"Just a moment, please. How about that debt?"

"Debt?"

"Yes; debt."

"I don't know what you are talking about," responded Merle with vast surprise."

"Then let me explain, dear."

"Oh, no; please don't. Explanations are as

'odious' as comparisons. Hark! I hear some one coming; oh, good! it 's May."

It was May, whistling merrily and thrashing the underbrush, for, ever since that touching tableau made memorable by her untimely entrance upon the scene, she had taken great pains never to surprise this pair again.

She wondered somewhat at the very cordial greeting that she received from her goddess, but seemed to be quite unconscious of any atmospheric disturbances that her presence might have occasioned or relieved; though her eyes glanced amusedly from a very pink goddess to a very rapt young man, who was studying the distant landscape with great assiduity. May was learning something.

"Where on earth have you kept yourself all the morning, Merle? I thought you were going to sew," she said.

"So I was, but I came here without my work and ——"

"And I interrupted her; and my shoulders are broad enough," said Bob; "they can stand the blame."

"Willard says we must go out on the river this afternoon; he told me to tell Merle it would be 'profanation' to lose such a day. (He thought the elegance of his phrasing would appeal to you, dear.)

It won't be much work to launch the canoes again, even though they are ready for shipping. Anyway, he said he 'd more than willingly do the work if you 'd all go."

"I second the proposition with all my heart," said Bob eagerly.

"I *must* sew, but that need n't prevent the rest of you going," said Merle, edging homeward. "Besides I promised Roy I 'd take him out."

"Now don't be contrary, Merle," said May, pleadingly; "don't spoil everything!—your sewing can wait; and besides I did n't hear anything about Roy before."

"I promised him a long time ago," said the short-sighted dissembler.

"He 's forgotten it, then. Don't try to dodge any more. Say 'yes,' just this once, there 's a dear, and I 'll do anything to please you."

Bob said nothing, but picked up a stick and whittled industriously; and Merle, fearing that he too thought her contrary and foolishly disobliging, threw discretion to the winds, and yielded reluctantly, saying:

"I 'll go on certain conditions; that we take Roy, and don't bother with the canoes, but hire a boat and row——"

"Horrors! five in a row-boat!" escaped Bob involuntarily.

"Now Merle, be sensible," persisted May. "There is n't a row-boat on the river would accommodate Bob's and Willard's long legs at the same time. And what 's the fun sitting on a rail fence when we can have the comfort of our cushions? As for Roy——"

"Just as you like. I propose a compromise, and you can meet me half-way or not. If you don't, then I 'm free to stick to my first intention, which I think I will, for it 's by far the most sensible."

"Accept by all means," whispered Bob as Merle turned and disappeared in the shrubbery. May did speedily accept, and Merle agreed to go. But the fates conspired against her, for Roy had been mysteriously whisked off by an indebted neighbor; and when Merle skipped down the bank she found both canoes launched and Willard in waiting, for May had omitted to say that Willard had already started for the boat, taking acceptance to his proposition for granted; and Merle, feeling it was foolish to rebel against what was clearly for her comfort, chose the wiser course and accepted her outwitting gracefully.

All seemed in the merriest of moods; an amazing flow of brilliant talk and sharp repartee floated

shoreward; and as the moss-colored canoe and the scarlet one bobbed gayly alongside, Merle succumbed to the beauty of the day, and agreed that the plan had been a wise one.

Her decision was unexpectedly and suddenly reversed however, for May, whose sharp eyes seldom found much in books, but never missed anything in nature, suddenly saw, or thought she saw, a much prized cardinal flower growing at the bend which rounded to the falls. The river was narrow and rocky, the water shallow, and Bob immediately refused to scrape his canoe, and to run the risk of laying her up just as they were preparing for camp.

Merle was not known to be especially brave, and preferred calm waters to troubled, but in the present instance, had she been consulted, she would have shot the rapids in preference to being left behind with Bob.

She had no choice, however, but to wave a goodbye, caution May not to venture too far, and to admire the secluded little cove into which Bob so skilfully shot his canoe. But the fine flow of talk that had redeemed the early part of the afternoon seemed spent, and though Merle did her best to keep it up, the pauses became more numerous and more felt.

She herself felt unaccountably nervous and ill at

ease, for an undercurrent of feeling that was growing too marked to ignore keyed her every sense to its highest pitch. Never had the sky looked so heavenly blue, the river so calm and clear, the song of the birds been so sweet and soulful. As they floated on, something of its peace stilled even her nervous forebodings, and she glanced first at the paddle in its rhythmical parting of the water, and then at the paddler. Just a glance, that was all, for the sudden color dyed Merle's cheeks and she looked away. In that one glance it seemed as if her Bob had disappeared, and a man, strong and purposeful, was in his place. For the moment his mastery overcome her, then her sex's tact recovered itself in a perfectly normal remark.

"I 'm sorry we left them. I know Mrs. Norton thinks that I will look out for May on the river. If we leave this little eddy and paddle out, don't you think we 'll meet them?"

"We 've left them many times before on the river; why this sudden regret, Merle?" questioned Bob with a wise smile that said as plainly as words that her ruse had failed.

Merle vouchsafed neither answer nor glance in reply, but reached her hand overboard, and trailed it idly in the water.

On, on, the birch-bark canoe drifted; on, on, with

only the silvery splash of the paddle and this idling hand to break the quiet.

"Merle!"

The tone in the voice dyed Merle's cheeks again, and the water dimpled from the trembling of her hand.

"Merle, dear, look at me! Don't you *know?*"

Yes, she knew, and afterward Merle felt it never would be possible to feel again such a moment of pain. Her heart seemed to shut up and to stop beating in one convulsive throb, that drew the blood back from her cheeks and left her pale and wretched.

Such a burden of love in that one whispered word! She never knew her plain, one-syllabled name could carry such an unfolding of love in its cadence—that one whispered word,—which the summer zephyr kissed and floated on to the song sparrow, to add to his symphony.

"Oh Bob—I 've thought—but I can't—I don't deserve——"

Fortunate it was that they were in a canoe, and that one ill-timed motion would send them both to the bottom of the river, for Bob's terror at the first words of her remark met with such lover's relief at its finish that he would surely have gone to her. But Merle faltered and stopped, and then shook her head as if in resolve to have the worst over.

"I knew I was doing wrong all this last month, and to-day most of all, I did n't want to come—and —and it seems my misfortune always to give pain—and, Bob, dear—don't look at me like that, and don't care for me—don't care for me!" sobbed Merle, covering her face with her hands.

"You 're not to blame dear, it 's just what you have done this last month that determined me to stop all this suspense, though I intended to wait till after camp. But to-day—I could n't wait—something impelled me to find out—I must know if you won't care for me just a little, Merle?"

"I don't care for any one. I 've had so little love in my life I suspect sometimes I don't know how to love."

"Then let me teach you, dear. We 'll reverse Orlando and Rosalind, and this river will do very well for the Forest of Arden. I have had little love in my life too, and that I think makes you all the dearer. You are a dozen denied loves all in one, the reward for the past, the promise of the future. Oh Merle—I love you so! I love you so, dear! it can't be you are going to be only a pain in my life."

"A pain? Oh, I hope not! Help me to be true to us both, Bob. I said I did n't know how to love. I 'll take that back. I 've had so little love in my life that I 'm starved for it,—and now I want it so—

I want it so that I don't dare to take it. Oh, Bob! I want to be sure—so sure—for I 'm in love with love!"

Left to its own guidance the little birch-bark canoe drifted gracefully on and ran ashore among the blossoming arrowhead and pickerel weed. Welcoming so opportune an escape Merle sprang ashore, and as a disguise to deeper feelings, laughingly held out her hands in invitation.

After mooring the little craft, Bob joined her, but no answering laughter or smile welcomed her. Longing to be generous and to ease the pain she had given to this dearest of friends, Merle, unskilled in love's refusal, did, perhaps, the worst possible thing. Stooping quickly she picked a cluster of the bluetts that everywhere starred the damp, rich ground, looking very like their sisters of a more tender name, and, utterly innocent of the flowers' suggestion, held them up as a peace offering.

The pain died out of Bob's face, the lover's hope sprang into his eyes, and he pointed to his coat lapel. Merle faltered, her eyes filling, as she recalled a similar act so many months ago when she had fastened in the striped pink and Bob had taken her for his life's Mentor. How young and childish she seemed then! how old and wise now!

But a new resolve awoke, and with a pretty ges-

ture Merle shook back her waves of hair and reached up smiling, somewhat fearful, yet intent on being generous, feeling perhaps that she could afford to give this little recompense for love's wound. But her pretty look of entreaty overpowered Bob, and he suddenly drew her to him.

Of course Merle struggled away, surprised and indignant! Dear me, she did nothing of the kind—poor little Merle! unspoiled by love's experience. She quietly yielded to the embrace, wondering why she was not willing to have her aspiring little wings pinioned by these strong arms, and kept all safe and happy in their clasp. Her dear kind Bob, who had piled her lap with every comfort his tact could compass, how deeply she was in debt, how poorly she must meet it! Yet there was no conflict, no yearning—only pain for him. She was not ready for the lover's love, but she needed the friend's love and could not bear to lose it. She glanced up shyly, longing to clasp her arms around his neck, and beg him not to care much,—just a little—but not too much. Bob read the impulse in her eyes and drank deep of their tender light, though the tenderness was only pity.

"Merle dear, think; it can't be wholly 'No.' It can't, Merle, it can't!"

"It is, Bob, and you least of all should wish me

HE SUDDENLY DREW HER TO HIM

to say 'Yes.' You would n't be content with less than all, even if I could bring myself to give it. Love means too much for me to deceive myself. It means —oh! so much, Bob. I want to feel, not that I could be happy with—with you, but that I should be perfectly wretched without you!"

"Does the 'but,' in disproving the last, prove the first, Merle?"

"Yes; I think so."

"That you could be happy with me now?"

"Ye—es, in a way."

"Then you must love me, dear?"

"I do—no, no—not in that way. It might be simply tolerance,—what the French marry with, you know. It must be something like that, because I can't say the last thing."

"Can't say that you would be perfectly wretched without your Bob?"

"No, oh no! I can't say that. Think how much is awaiting me—my music, my writing—oh, I 've so much to do, Bob, so much! I am impatient to begin. Besides, we are young yet, too young to bind our future till we have seen a little more of life and its possibilities for us. Surely you must feel that, Bob."

Bob looked down at the fair, enthusiastic face and studied it unhindered, for the gray eyes were veiled

in a flight of fancy that wafted the dreamer far away. Gradually the pain died out of his own face; his eyes grew bright; a smile struggled for the mastery. He looked—not at all as you would expect a rejected lover to look. He too saw a vision, the vision of a future sweet and fair enough to satisfy his deepest longings, and no farther off than was right and good for him—for her. His deep, brown eyes always seemed to have the faculty of seeing farther than other eyes, and just now that power of divination stood him in good stead.

"I see, dear," he said softly. "We 'll wash the slate clean and begin again. I 'll hand Cupid back his arrow, for he shot—too soon."

The last words were spoken so low that Merle did not catch their import; for she woke slowly from her reverie and said, after an introspective pause: "In books, rejecting a lover always makes a fearful tangle; usually one or the other of the pair has to go abroad; but in real life it is n't so bad, is it?"

"Not so very."

"We 're so sensible about it; we won't have to go round dodging each other, will we? Can't we be just the same?"

"Just the same."

"Just as if nothing had happened?"

"Just as if nothing had happened."

"And you 'll be Bob, and I 'll be just Merle?"

"And I 'll be Bob, and you 'll be—just Merle."

"Then I 'm satisfied, and I 'll go to camp. Will it be proper?"

"Of course; we 're not going to avoid each other, you said."

"And nobody will know?"

"Not a body!"

"I should miss you so if the dear old times had to stop," sighed Merle, eying a black vest button reflectively, seemingly unaware that in strict propriety that vest button and its wearer should have been somewhat farther from her vision.

Perhaps the fact suddenly dawned on her, for she glanced up shyly, met a pair of brown eyes that more than answered her awakening, and, blushing poppy red, turned away.

"Just a moment, dear,—just a moment. Then you can spread your trial wings and fly away for—a little while. See! a sunbeam has got caught in your hair and is held a prisoner. Let me free it, just as a seal to this first chapter of our—what shall we call it?—love? friendship? compact? yes, compact,—that 's the word. What! not one little caress to make it good and strong, when I feel as if I deserved a dozen for being so amenable?"

Merle bowed her pretty head, and Bob touched

the soft hair; touched it reverently with lips that trembled with unspoken love; touched it lingeringly while in his heart rose words that answered hope with hope; words which he softly whispered in the pink ear that was so near to his lips:

"'Sweet, good-night!
This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet."

"See!" faltered Merle, with glistening eyes and averted face; "see! there 's a red canoe just rounding the bend, and in it—yes, in it are May and Willard, waving their hands to us."

CHAPTER XVIII

HOME AGAIN

Labor Day distinguished itself that year by being as late as possible, and if not as hot as possible, certainly far hotter than one might reasonably expect from a fall month. Above was an exasperatingly cool and motionless sky; below, a perspiring and scurrying crowd.

Of two contingents this crowd was composed, each intent on its own seeking. One was that vast mass of workers who gave the day its name, out on a fierce quest for pleasure; the other, no less vast but more favored of fortune, the returning vacationists, whom the knell of Labor Day had rung in from mountain, seaside, and country.

Each was scurrying for the same goal now; the pleasure-seekers weary of the day's exactions, the travellers no less weary. The former had stood hours under a scorching sun; had clapped approval of the laborers' long line of perspiring, dusty marchers that looked as if the day's work was the hardest

of the three hundred and sixty-five; had imbibed freely of the appetizing wares of the vender order; and had done the honors to the junior members right royally in the shape of red balloons, pink lemonade, variegated confections, who, as a final test to the stability of their digestive organs, had churned the same in a dizzy swirl in the merry-go-round.

Now the two waves met and overflowed every available conveyance. Horse-cars were stormed, and their patient brutes bent willing necks to their daily yoke and strained and stumbled and flashed sparks over the cobblestones with no encouragement but the lash of the driver's whip, or now and then the help up some steep grade of an overworked relay, who strained and struggled and panted with them.

Omnibuses were filled to bursting, cabbies grew insolent with the intoxication of the day's perquisites, and private coachmen swore the air blue for precedence.

The terminal stations were bewildering with confusion; engines snorted and screeched and belched the air black with suffocating smoke; the ear-splitting disconnecting of air-brakes scattered the unwary, and left a smiling brakeman to enjoy his joke; the crowd forgot its manners and pushed and jostled madly for right of way; infants cried at the uproar; small dogs yelped with pain, finding no

spot of safety for their four small feet; baggage trams flew up and down the walks, and left to passers-by the privilege of guarding their shins; trunks were tossed about like soap bubbles, the only wonder being that the simile was not further carried out by their bursting in mid-air.

Into this pandemonium a long-distance, double-engine train slowly slid, and after many puffs and snorts and shrieks, stood steaming and puffing like a winded horse.

In a twinkling its coaches disgorged their black swarm, hot, cramped, cinder-dusty, and weary; who awoke, nevertheless, with the first step on stable ground, and were quickly lost in the mass around them.

Half-way down this train, beside the entrance to a parlor car, a colored porter stood with his adjustable step, and saw a possible nickel or dime in every offer for help that his black hands made. Near him others stood in waiting, scanning eagerly every face. Coachmen in livery, maids, nurses, friends, relatives, were all eager to confer further favors on these already favored children of fortune. They pressed nearer and nearer the step and greatly hindered the passengers, till the porter waved them back unceremoniously.

He had just cleared the way to small purpose

when a young girl dashed out of the car, poised a moment on the top step, and then, ignoring the porter 's hand, dashed blindly down.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" said the girl, rescuing her tennis racket from the tip of an old gentleman's cane, which he carried atilt under his arm. "I beg your pardon, sir!"

The old gentleman turned savagely, glared up at the apologist, up at a light frousled head, at a face that evidently had once matched it in complexion, but at present was freckled, burned, and tanned, saw a flash of white teeth, and smiled involuntarily at the saucy brightness, freckles and all, that made the girl piquantly charming. His ire took wing and he was just about to meet the apology gracefully, when his glance was diverted to a second young girl just emerging from the car's gloom.

She too was tall, with a mass of chestnut hair that a fluttering veil now hid and now disclosed coyly; she too was tanned, but not enough to hide the rich glow of two rounded cheeks; and as she tripped down the steps the veil lifted and out peered two brilliant gray eyes.

"By Jove!" muttered the old man to himself. "These nineteenth-century girls!" and he tucked his cane anew under his arm, moved nearer for a second view, and in the act came very near relieving several

passers-by of their eye-balls, and acquainted other scurrying pedestrians with the exact location of their three lower floating ribs.

"Don't drag on me so; and come away from those wheels, Roy! If you yank Pickles again, you sha'n't lead him!"

"Let me take Roy, May, if you can manage my shawl-strap and this fishing tackle. Bob was loaded and I insisted on taking them," said Merle, as she drew one hand through her father's arm, and took Roy with the other.

"We 're a sight for a wondering world!" laughed May, with another flash of white teeth, as she added the shawl-strap and fishing tackle to three umbrellas, two alpine poles, one camera tripod, two tennis rackets, and pushed a flashing tin botany box farther along its strap on her shoulder.

"Mother!" she continued, "you look more fit for Castle Island than for the entrance of a parlor car. Let me see; that flat thing under your right arm which looks horribly like a whiskey flask is, I believe, the rattlesnake the boys shot and preserved in alcohol. If you 'd remove the wrapper, dear, so that they could see it, the crowd would probably give you right of way with pleasure. Left arm,—Roy's sail-boat, wraps *ad infinitum*, one bunch of wilted herbs (Thanksgiving in embryo), one ca-

nary cage, and—what on earth is in that bandanna?"

"Mr. Elliot's mosses and Roy's shells; they are both light; I can carry them as well as not. Start ahead, and finish your inventory in the carriage. We 're all here. Will and Grace have gone up-town to see about furnishings for the new room—insatiable dears! and the boys shot out back when the train slowed up, and took a cross-cut over the tracks to the baggage room, to see about the canoes and trunks. I told Bob we were competent enough to get from here to the waiting-room in safety; so pilot ahead, May. Yes, sweetie, you shall have your choo-choo when we get home. Mr. Elliot, look out for your specimens,—that hornet's nest is slipping down."

After missing and finally meeting, after unloading and reloading arms again, after much running to and fro and the compassing of many brilliant afterthoughts, the three women, with Roy and Mr. Elliot, succeeded in squeezing themselves and their medley of belongings into a coach, and the coachman in closing the door.

"It 's over!" groaned May, sinking back against the cushions, and blinking out from her screen of fish-poles and alpine-sticks. "It 's over—a month of joy—the very quintessence of joy! Who was that

spleeny livered philosopher, Merle, who said that anticipation was always greater than realization? I should like to see him privately for a moment. Did you ever have such fun in your life?"

"Never!"

"Such canoeing, morning, noon, and night—principally night—moonlight, *chèrie;* do you tumble?"

"Moonlight? certainly."

"And such a company! did ever such a congenial one meet this side of—earth, mother earth, plain, prosaic earth. And such drives! Such walks! Such pretty secluded little—little walks, Merlie?"

"I remember."

"Such picnics! Such tramps! Such camp-fire stories! Such appetites! Such—such mosquitoes! I think Bob has one in alcohol that had the audacity to light on your hand, dear" (in a stage whisper). "Such—such—where did I leave off? Oh, what did you think of Bob's cousin Will?"

"I met him before, you know."

"Promising *enfant, n'est-ce-pas?*"

"He does very well for Amherst; usually I fly the Harvard flag, you know."

"Oh, it was all glorious! glorious! Too glorious! Might I put my feet out of the window, mother? Thackeray did when he felt as I do just now."

"And so reasonable too!" said Mrs. Norton somewhat drily, extricating Roy's fish-hook from the Philosopher's coat collar, that promising young gentleman having been amusing himself by angling for an imaginary trout. "I can't quite understand how it ever came about; but Bob insisted that he had been over the figures, and it was all right; I need not trouble myself about them."

"Bless the boy!" ejaculated May. "There never lived a dearer one,—that is, not many. And he seemed in such jolly spirits, Merle; did you notice? Unquestionably a host 'to the manner born.'"

"A very intelligent young man," observed the Philosopher dreamily. "His knowledge of local flora is quite remarkable."

"And the month's familiarity brought no contempt," pursued Mrs. Norton. "My former high estimate of him is more than confirmed. I told him frankly last evening, when we were having a talk, that I admired him for certain things. He is not the sort that praise spoils, but will rather try to live up to it."

But the young woman in the corner added no drop to this bucket of appreciation, only pulled down her veil and glanced idly out of the coach window. "Still waters run deep," they say.

Yet the month had been no less joyous to her

than to May. How could she fail to appreciate the much-needed rest from care and endeavor, the free, open life, the championship of merry, congenial friends, and the unceasing watchfulness of one who, however free and unstudied his attentions might appear to the unobserving, she well knew was on the watch to cater to her every wish, spoken or unspoken?

Oh it was glorious, those long idling days, when her deeply appreciative nature had drunk long draughts of the beauty about her; the changing sky, the deeps and shallows of mountain light, the tints of valley and meadow; and beyond, as far as the eye could pierce, the sinuous curves of the lazy river, blue like the heavens it mirrored.

Yes, it was glorious, "in linked sweetness long drawn out." It was glorious while it lasted; it would be glorious to look back on, an inexhaustible cup of joy for future thirsty sips.

The next year would have its hard and disappointing days, no doubt, when Della returned to college, and the care of the little suite and her irresponsible father would rest alone on her young shoulders. Yet the care of this father was fast becoming not only a duty but a pleasure. Though the School of Life had not taught him to be shrewd and worldly, she was beginning to see the beauty of his pure and

tranquil life,—learning to love him dearly too, and to realize that whatever was best in her came from him. And while she was learning to accept this father and love him, she was learning to accept others with less reservation; to see the good everywhere, and to ask for perfection nowhere save in the strivings of her own ambitious young heart. Mrs. Norton was right. Home was not a place, but a condition, and it did rest with her to make its atmosphere what she would. She had succeeded a little; she would succeed better the coming year.

He, her father, had had his first taste of social pleasure for years through her and her friends; and how he had revelled in that freedom, how kind and gracious he had unceasingly been, how responsive to every effort for his entertainment! And how congenial he and Bob had grown to be as they tramped long miles through "bog and bosky bourn" in studious quest for some much prized "specimen." How well they had become acquainted in that intimate life—he and her father—she and Bob, good comrades all! Some magician had been at work in those idling days, for a quiet restfulness had crept into Merle's heart, which she did not question, but accepted gratefully, as one more gift that a smiling and, she hoped, not too fickle fortune had of late laid at her feet.

Well, it was over now, as May had said; and work came next. She welcomed it, and as if in sympathy with the scurrying, restless, noisy crowd, lifted her veil and peered out, saying as the coach swerved round familiar corners and dashed into well-known streets:

"How good it seems to be back, after all!"

"I was just thinking, how detestable!" observed May. "I never knew we lived in such a dirty street! How vile those red bricks look after our velvet meadows! And, mother! the steps need a new coat of paint."

"A little of your tan, dear, would go a good way," suggested Merle teasingly; "and those freckles would work in nicely too; pebbling is all the style now."

"Don 't throw stones, my 'nut-brown mayde,' the glass in your own roof is far too brittle. Oh! oh! drop thy veil dearest,—

"'T is beauty truly blent, whose red and brown
Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on.'

"Here we are! Alight, goddess. Shall I play Sir Walter Raleigh, and throw my fishing tackle down for you to step on? (another historical fact, my dear, which escaped my over-crammed memory that day we inventoried!) Musty! musty! I smell

rats! *rats!* RATS! Is it typhoid, mother, that people always have on returning from the country? Turn on all the faucets; throw open the blinds;—light, light! 'More light!' as some great author said when he was about to give up—Don't ask me for that choo-choo again, Roy! Have the goodness to wait till I have had time to remove a peck or two of these cinders—yes, yes, I 'll save a few for your engine; they 'll be the real thing and no mistake,—no flies on them!

"Oh! oh! there are Waffles and Sally Lunn on Bob's piazza! How they 've grown! That butler has done himself proud on them! And what a luxuriant crop of whiskers Sally has sprouted! and what a tail!—my eyes! what a tail! First class in natural history, step up! What is a cat's tail made for? Answer: To balance on rail fences on dark nights! Ten extras; move up. Second class in natural history: For what are a cat's whiskers designed? Answer: To strum moonlight nights as an accompaniment to mezzo-tenor roundelays!"

"Oh, May!" laughed Merle, dropping into the old arm-chair, "no one needs a tonic when you 're round. You 're like a whiff of perpetual spring. Come here, dear, and kiss me; for I have n't seen half enough of you this last month with so much going on."

"Sir Walter kneels to his Queen!"

"You 're getting to be such a dear May. I 've noticed how willingly you gave up your plans and accepted others, how helpful you were with Roy, and how thoughtful for your mother; besides—shall I make you vain? You 're growing positively stunning, my dear."

"Gently, gently, most gracious Queen. Is this my knighting? Methinks I feel my wings asprout. Goddess, do pin-feathers prick? Something does, here under my clavicle; most likely it 's simply a pin, no feathers."

"Seriously, May, I love you for your endeavor."

"And I love you for yourself. Next to mother and Grace you come; and when I think how I dreaded renting those rooms, it does n't seem possible such a blessing could have been so disguised."

"And I love you, dear, because you are the first one I ever truly loved."

"Goddess,—one question."

"Owl,—a dozen."

"It 's personal—you 'll resent it."

"This is a privileged night, dear."

"Did anything—happen at camp?"

"A great many things, to judge from your own recital just now."

"Anything in particular, I mean?"

"I fear, dear, that my coat of tan covers a green tinting that I feel overspreading my features."

"You are not so green that you don't know what I mean. Have—have you yoked the third finger of your left hand?"

Merle dropped back in her chair in such a breathless burst of laughter that it was some time before she could say:

"No! I 've not yoked the third finger of my left hand, Owl!"

"And the sky is clear for another year?"

"Nothing portends, to my knowledge."

"I 'm glad," said May seriously. "Now, nothing will come between us, and we 'll be just girls for another year. There 's a kiss for that; and now we 'll come down to earth. Hear that dear woman rattling the stove downstairs? That means flapjacks for us all. The boys will eat with us off the stationary tubs, and with the coal shovel and poker, probably; for it will take mother at least a week to remember where she has hidden things. Now I 'm off for some syrup,—and pickled limes, by Jove! Six pickled limes I 'll devour on the spot as a recompense for a month's denial!"

The family did dine *ensemble* off the stationary tubs, though the blackened silver was brought to light in time to save the shovel and poker from being

drafted into service. After which merry meal the family repaired to the sitting-room, and Mrs. Norton moved eagerly and importantly about, seeing a dozen things to do at once, and regretting, doubtless, that her digital possibilities were not wholly equal to the occasion.

"I can't agree with you, May, that everything looks disappointingly shabby. To me, after living in a pine hut for a month, things look positively luxurious. Or is it my love for the flesh-pots of Egypt?"

"It 's your very philosophical rendering of 'Unto him that hath shall be given,'" observed May laconically, as she stepped back to view critically the fernery she was building in the open grate.

"Come, Roy—you 're the next task in order; but mother can't rock you very long to-night, so be spry and mount your Pegasus and be off for the Land of Dreams. After all, what a happy year this has been," continued Mrs. Norton, who was apt to be in a reflective mood when this last much-loved and over-indulged fledgeling folded his wings for the night. "How much better things have turned out than I had reason to expect, and how much strength we waste in worry. If the next year will deal as kindly with us, I shall have no room for regrets."

"It has been a happy year, and eventful too when

you look back, for I feel as if I 'd gained a sister and a brother too," said May, smiling from Merle to the absorbed bridegroom who stood coatless and collarless measuring the windows of the new room.

"Yes, it seems dull and hard sometimes from day to day, but it has been happy and full of plans and surprises after all," said Merle softly; "and I in particular have so much to be thankful for."

"And I too," smiled the pretty bride, handing her monarch the yard-stick wrong-end-to and getting her small hand kissed for her bungling. "Health, love, and home—what more can one want!"

"We 're a saintly, satisfied crowd," said May; "won't somebody please aspire a little! Mother, send in your next year's order early, and avoid the rush!"

"I wish for nothing, dear, aside from the health and happiness of my girls. Three I have now, for Merle has grown so inexpressibly dear to me, I forget sometimes that she is not really mine."

"Keep on forgetting," whispered Merle, as she dropped on the hassock at Mrs. Norton's feet, and lovingly yielded herself to the arms held out for her endearment; thereby causing a certain gentleman in the room to look with savage envy on that plain black gown that could hold so sweet a burden unmoved.

"Willard! take your nose out of that paper, and

let us hear what noble act redeemed your past year, and what plans will glorify your future," commanded May.

"I see nothing," replied that shrewd young man, scanning a memorandum book he drew from his pocket. "I see nothing, Captain, which the recording angel has placed to my credit—save—wait!—just one deed of mercy. I rescued—that is, I helped to rescue—a young lady from drowning last spring!"

"From drowning!" came in a chorus from the uninformed.

"Yes, drowning! from swift and certain death!"

"Why, here 's a romance," said the bride. "Was she pretty?"

"Pretty! A perfect nymph, with golden hair and"—here a freckled nose went up, but the danger of its angle was lost in the mirror's dissolving view.

"Have you seen her since?" queried Mrs. Norton innocently.

"Trust me for that, madam."

"Are the cards out, laddie?" interposed the builder of the grate's fernery.

"No, Captain, not yet. At present it 's a case of 'Barkis is willing.'"

"It's a case that 's not likely to prove contagious, sir; and I predict that he 'll linger in a slow

and consuming fever for years to come. Have you any redeeming plans for the future, Hero?"

"None, Siren,—only hope."

"Bob, let's have a word of sense from you."

"From me?" said Bob nervously. "You've applied to the wrong quarter, priestess. My confessional is in my heart. We all have our plans and hopes and resolves, I suppose, but the best of us don't care to be publicly pilloried."

"No regrets, sir? No incense burnt at an unfeeling shrine?" parried May, athirst for mischief.

"Some regrets, surely—but no wasted incense, Argus."

"You're a modest lot, and you grow more saintly and satisfied with every breath. Merle, do teach this humdrum crowd how to aspire!"

"I can only aspire for myself," said Merle dreamily. "There is so much to live for, I pity those who find life empty. For myself, I thirst to begin. There's my music awaiting me at the Conservatory, my scribbling, of course, and you all know I'm going back to take the advance year at the High. After that,—Fate alone knows what."

"I shall graduate this coming year," said May importantly; "after that I think I shall devote my time to Art,—with a big A, observe. In a few years, when your blood is curdling over Merle's book,

you will be obliged to go abroad to view *my* exhibit in the Paris Salon. I have offered to collaborate with Merle, but I 've always heard there 's a great deal of jealousy in that profession."

"This retrospection and introspection is an idle waste of time," said Merle, rising, "when we ought to be up to our ears in work. I 'll give you not only precept, but example, folkses; for I want to get my nest in apple-pie order before Della returns from her trip with Miss Stein. I want her to feel that I have done as much for her as she did for me when I was getting ready for camp. Come, Bob, you said you 'd help father unpack his specimens."

But that intelligent young man had already anticipated this invitation, for he had risen when Merle rose, and stood holding the door open and looking down on her ladyship.

"Mercy!" said Mrs. Norton, "there goes the door-bell! Who *can* it be?"

"It 's one of the little Bendonsa girls, I think," answered Merle. "I wrote and told her to come right down and get some of the pretty things I brought before they wilt. Poor dears, without a whiff of summer!"

It was a small Bendonsa, who clasped Merle's offered hand and clung to her shyly, bewildered by this unexpected sea of faces.

"Me, too," coaxed Roy, roused by the bell's tinkle.

"Yes, you too," said Merle indulgently. "You shall share your pretty shells with Carlotta"; and Merle clasped the second fat little fist, and stood smiling into the upturned faces, looking not unlike Thayer's picture of *Charity Guarding the Innocent.*

"Three cheers for work! One! Two! Three! Give them with a will, Owl; daytime is over and your eyes should be especially wide open now," said Merle, laughing. "Come, Bob. Good-night, all; good-night."

THE END

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